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Perceptions of Experienced African American Male Principals of Supports Needed to Improve Their Instructional Leadership Skills

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Abstract

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MAT, Kent State University, 1998

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Education

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Abstract

African American male principals frequently are placed in low-achieving schools but provided limited support. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they receive to improve their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement. The social cognitive career theory and the transformative learning theory served as the conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study. The research questions for this study examined principals' perceptions of how they were being supported, the challenges of getting support, and how their support could be improved. Nine experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts, with at least 5 years of experience as a principal were interviewed using semistructured, predetermined questions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, followed by a coding process to conduct theme analysis. Five themes emerged: (a) individualized support and professional development, (b) coaching and mentorship, (c) professional collaboration, (d) navigating district systems and processes, and (e) specific issues in the urban school experience. Recommendations included conducting an in-depth investigation designed to identify the types of individualized support and style of coaching needed to improve the instructional leadership skills of African American male principals in urban school districts. This study may foster positive social change by providing the appropriate support to African American male principals in urban schools that could benefit males of color, particularly, in more significant ways than simply improving academic achievements.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my grandmothers, Girllean M. Bowie and Sadie J. Shields. Having both in my life gave me hope, direction, and plenty of love and support to take on any challenge that presented itself while growing up in the ghetto. Their unwavering commitment provided me with what I needed to take on the challenges of life, along with writing this dissertation. Together, along with my grandfather, Hezekiah Jr, they provided me space to grow confident in my ability to conquer all obstacles that came my way. I dedicate this work to them. Together, my grandmothers were the hot and cold water that gave my life warmth. I love them both like a two-sided coin. Without them, I would not have been able to grow and develop into the person that I am today. Thank you, Hean, thank you, Momma, thank you Meathead.

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all that I was to do, was to simply see it through!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Principals are responsible for addressing broad social and systemic issues that affect student education and performance (Henderson, 2015). The school principal's leadership directly influences student academic success and failure, especially for students of color (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Lomotey, 1993). Particularly in public school districts with diverse student populations, African Americans continue to be underrepresented in educational settings (Wallace & Gagen, 2020). Although aspiring principals receive training from university-based institutions, support is still needed to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the challenges of the school leadership position (Tingle et al., 2019). To turn the tide of academic achievement and nurture the development of a positive self-image for males of color, African American males can serve as a positive role model (Wallace & Gagen, 2020). The power of this role model can develop and nurture a positive self-image.

One of the strongest ways to enhance the access of African American students to positive school experiences, leading them to greater academic outcomes, is to have an effective African American male principal (Henderson, 2015). Nevertheless, African Americans continue to have a lower probability of becoming a principal (Fuller et al., 2019). African American assistant principals are less likely to be promoted when compared to White assistant principals and they wait longer for promotion (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). The underrepresentation of African American male principals in leadership roles could reduce the influence of positive African American male role models for students of color.

Lomotey (1993) found that African American male leaders showed compassion and understanding of students and their communities, along with a commitment to their students' education. These ethno-humanistic characteristics, as Lomotey described them, explain the benefit of finding ways to support African American male principals and increase their retention in schools. Identifying new approaches that contribute to supporting principals in their instructional leadership roles will provide gainful insight likely to inform school districts on how best to support African American male principals in their positions (Honig, 2012).

Little was known about the perceptions of African American principals regarding the support they received in improving their instructional leadership skills so that the student academic achievement could improve. Therefore, there was a need to understand the perceptions of African American principals regarding the support provided to them to improve their instructional leadership skills. For the current study, experienced African American male principals who work in urban school districts were interviewed. In this chapter, the background of the study is first discussed. The problem and purpose statements are then presented. The research questions for the current study are then put forward. After the conceptual framework is explained, terms are defined, and the significance of the research is discussed. Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are then presented. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Background

African American male principals represented 10.5% of all school principals and 7.8% of all public-school principals, with 4.8% having at least 4 years of experience

(National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). The need to improve the instructional leadership skills of African American male principals was evidenced by the challenging school communities that they were usually leading. Although the overall school dropout rate in the United States in 2019 was 5.1%, the dropout rate for African American and Hispanic students, who commonly attend urban schools, was 5.6% and 7.7% respectively (NCES, 2021). Beyond initial principal hiring initiatives, school districts lack district-wide supports for African American male principals because of the assumption that race and gender do not affect how these educational leaders function (Henderson, 2015). Tracking the career development of African American male principals and determining their professional development needs was important because principals succeed by having continual professional and personal development throughout an entire career (Duncan, 2013).

Managing urban schools is a challenging endeavor (DeMatthews, 2016). To appreciate the cultural awareness that African American male educators possess, and the role this awareness could play in increasing student opportunities for academic success, it is important to learn how African American males embrace their roles as principals (Cornelius, 2016). Determining how principals were prepared throughout the process of becoming school leaders was critical. School leadership preparation programs served as pathways to the principalship (Mette et al., 2017). There was a need to understand how principals were being supported prior to assuming the position and how their instructional leadership skills were supported throughout their careers.

Problem

The problem I addressed in this study is that African American male principals are frequently placed in low-achieving schools but are provided limited support beyond programs for new principals (see Henderson, 2015). Instructional leadership skills affect the teaching and learning process and can contribute to improving student academic achievement (see Sebastian et al., 2019). Students of color benefit from having an African American principal (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Lomotey, 1993). Failing to explore the perceptions of experienced African American male principals regarding the support they receive in improving their instructional leadership skills could have a negative effect on future academic outcomes of students, particularly for students of color (Bailes & Guthery, 2020).

The specific research problem addressed through this study was the lack of support for experienced principals to improve their instructional leadership skills needed to improve student academic achievement. In contrast, novice principals were provided with supports through district-formed initiatives. How experienced African American male principals perceived the support they received in improving their instructional leadership skills was not understood. According to Tingle et al. (2019), the extent to which support is needed for school leaders should be examined continually. Understanding these perceptions was necessary to enhance the opportunity for African American males to maintain leadership roles in low-achieving schools. This understanding addressed this gap in the literature and may possibly improve performance

distinctions through improved student achievement in schools with large populations of African American students.

Purpose

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills to improve student academic achievement. The study was conducted with principals working in urban school districts. Nine African American males with at least 5 years of experience were interviewed. All participants were currently serving as principals in urban school districts. Participants were asked about current support they received in instructional leadership, the challenges they experienced for which they needed support, and ways they believed instructional leadership support could be strengthened.

Data were gathered using one-on-one interviews that I conducted virtually. The interviews provided an opportunity for experienced African American male principals to share their personal perceptions in confidence and to describe their lived experiences regarding the support they have received for instructional leadership, the challenges they faced in improving their instructional leadership, and how their districts could help to improve their support. An interview protocol was used (see Appendix A). Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify themes and patterns that emerged.

Conceptual Framework

Two theories were used to perform the conceptual framework for this study: the social cognitive career theory (SCCT), initially introduced by Lent et al. (1994) and the

transformative learning theory (TLT), initially introduced by Mezirow (1978). The SCCT was based on the social cognitive theory by Bandura (1989). The SCCT focuses on environmental and social factors that influence self-efficacy, interest, and performance in choosing a career path (Hansen & Leuty, 2007).

The SCCT, according to Dziak (2020), is a cognitive approach to processing career development continually, by enabling an examination of facets of career selection and development. The SCCT was relevant to this study because it explored how people ultimately achieved success in their chosen careers. The theory provided the necessary framework to discover supports for experienced African American males in their leadership positions in urban school districts. Navarro et al. (2019) identified the SCCT as a framework used to understand how personal factors influenced career development. According to the theory, the internal drive necessary to meet the challenges of leading in urban school districts ultimately determines if any identified supports are effective in developing instructional leadership skills of African American male principals.

The key components of the TLT are understanding others' perspectives, critically examining previously held assumptions, and deciding whether to act on the new perspective (Baumgartner, 2020). The TLT provides a philosophy that focuses on the individual as a human being by determining what supports the individual needs from others (Baumgartner, 2020). In this way, the theory supports the need to understand the instinctive role of African American principals in their ability to show compassion and understanding of African American students and communities (Lomotey, 1993).

The use of the TLT helped to support my exploration of the perspective of experienced African American male principals. The support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills may have determined their effectiveness to improve student academic outcomes and achievement. Wlodarsky (2018) used the TLT as a framework to determine how the learning of adults was stimulated through the process of reflection. Using the TLT in this study allowed experienced African American male principals to reflect on their current practice of instructional leadership and gauged their desire to change and enhance current practices.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the support they receive for improving their instructional leadership skills?

RQ2: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the challenges they experience with gaining instructional leadership support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills?

RQ3: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe ways to improve the instructional leadership support they need for their leadership?

Nature of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills to improve student academic achievement. A

qualitative method was chosen to elicit authentic responses from a group of educators who have usually been overlooked in educational research studies. This qualitative study may provide a valuable learning experience that could help sustain and develop the leadership skills of experienced African American male principals. A basic qualitative study was best suited to explore the experiences of the principals in depth. The study design allowed a deeper understanding of how African American male principals perceived their instructional leadership responsibility and to understand whether support in this area was generally overlooked.

Nine African American males with at least 5 years of experience working in urban schools were interviewed. All participants were currently serving as principals in urban school districts. Participants were asked about current support they received in instructional leadership, the challenges they experienced for which they needed support, and ways they believed instructional leadership support could have been strengthened. Data were gathered by means of one-on-one interviews that I conducted virtually.

An interview protocol was used (see Appendix A). Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify themes and patterns that emerged. Study participants were categorized in groups based on the current stages of their careers (see Oplatka, 2010) to determine if there were any notable differences. This process enabled a determination of whether consistencies existed in how principals viewed their instructional leadership needs based on their career stages (see Duncan, 2013; Earley & Weindling, 2007; Oplatka, 2004, 2010).

Definitions

Terminology used throughout this study was defined to provide greater clarity to the subject matter.

African American Male: An African American male is a male descendant of enslaved Africans whose ancestors took part in the African diaspora and were forced into slavery by British, Spanish, and Portuguese imperialists in the Americas (Spring, 2016).

Instructional Leadership: Instructional leadership is leadership involving the observation of classroom teachers to provide the necessary supports to improve teacher capacity and improve student academic outcomes. Instructional leadership policy is leadership policy used by school principals to improve curriculum and classroom instructional practices (Vogel & Alhudithi, 2021).

Social Cognitive Career Theory: SCCT is a theory that explained the cognitive process of choosing a career path based on environmental and social factors, along with self-efficacy, interest, and performance (Hansen & Leuty, 2007). The SCCT, according to Dziak (2020), is a cognitive approach to processing career development continually, by enabling an examination of facets of career selection and development.

Transformative Learning Theory: TLT is a theory based on a humanistic philosophy that focuses on the individual, the need for support from others in the process of change, and the general belief that people can change (Baumgartner, 2020). The key components of the TLT are understanding others' perspectives, critically examining previously held assumptions, and deciding whether to act on the new perspective (Baumgartner, 2020).

Urban Area: An urban area refers to a densely populated area where the population is 50,000 or more people (NCES, 2014).

Urban Schools: Urban schools are defined as metropolitan schools serving students in urban areas. In the current study, urban schools are understood to be schools serving communities of low socioeconomic status (Lee et al., 2019).

Assumptions

Assumptions refer to a researcher's own theories, paradigms, and perspectives (Creswell, 2014). Assumptions in a study are accepted as true without proof. Several assumptions were made in this study. I assumed that principals had insight into the needs of their own instructional leadership skills. I assumed that the participants would answer the interview questions authentically and truthfully. Truthful answers during the interview process were basic to the credibility of the study. I also assumed that different individuals in the interview process had different perspectives on the same phenomenon, that all these different perspectives were truthful and valid, and that these different perspectives all contributed to an understanding of the phenomenon investigated.

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations refer to boundaries to a study set by the researcher. This study was delimited to include interviews conducted with experienced principals who worked in urban school districts, rather than in a private, rural, or suburban school district. The study was delimited to include only African American male school principals as participants, rather than individuals of any other ethnicity or gender. Additionally, I did not focus the study on improving student achievement or teaching strategies, as the study

focused primarily on principals' perceptions related to improving instructional leadership skills. Similarly, the study was not delimited in terms of the grade levels of the school of which the participant was a leader.

The conceptual framework for this study was based on two theories: the SCCT, and the TLT. Although I considered critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 1992) as a potential theoretical framework for this study, I determined that this theory did not support the inquiry sufficiently well. The CRT would have revealed underlying bias and systemic barriers that caused the underrepresentation of African American male principals. However, revealing these barriers was not the intent of this study. In addition, although the CRT was related to this study because the study involved African American men, I was not exploring racism or marginalization in schools that affected issues of underrepresentation (see DeMatthews, 2016).

Two other theories considered as frameworks for the current study were transformational leadership theory and transactional leadership theory. These theories were related to the leadership aspect of being a principal. However, the goal of the study was not to understand the skills or the nature of school leadership but to investigate the support that principals received in the course of their careers.

Limitations, Challenges, and/or Barriers

In conducting this study, several challenges were anticipated. The number of African American male principals with at least 5 years of experience working in urban school districts was limited. School principals have busy schedules and recruiting enough interview candidates from this population to participate in this study could have been

problematic. The effect of COVID-19 on the educational systems restricted the availability of potential participants and their opportunities to explore the topic. Additionally, my role as a principal and the principal researcher for this study could had potentially presented a bias in information gathering and analysis. To mitigate this risk, I refrained from drawing conclusions not emerging from the data, and I remained open-minded during data analysis.

Significance

The current study was significant in that it contributed to positive social change by motivating school district leaders to recognize the value of experienced African American male principals as instructional school leaders and improve the supports they received to strengthen their instructional leadership skills. Improving the development of African American males in urban leadership positions began with learning from current African American male educators to determine what instructional leadership supports from the central district office were needed to improve student achievement. Young males of color could benefit in more significant ways than simply improving academic achievement. If the desire is to turn the tide of academic achievement and nurture the development of a positive self-image for males of color, the power lies within male educators of color to serve as positive role models (Wallace & Gagen, 2020).

A lack of African American leadership has had a negative effect on African American children. African American students benefit from having an African American principal because African American school administrators are able to provide more positive school experiences for African American students, thereby improving academic

outcomes (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Effective African American male principals use a unified leadership style that motivates them to adopt an ethno-humanist role that shows their commitment, involvement, and belief in the capability of African American students (Henderson, 2015). According to Tingle et al. (2019), the extent to which support is needed for school leaders should be examined continually. Examining perceptions of experienced African American male principals, to identify circumstances that could lead to an increased amount of instructional leadership support to improve student achievement, is a significant catalyst for social change. The current study was significant because there was a need for more instructionally sound African American leaders to inspire academic achievement for students, and for students of color in particular.

Summary

In existing research on urban education, the perceptions of African American male principals have been routinely overlooked and underrepresented. However, studies that have been conducted on African American male principals have frequently mentioned the positive impact that African American male educators had on African American students and teachers. Therefore, it is incumbent on school district leaders to provide these principals with instructional supports throughout their careers. Duncan (2013) noted that professional development was necessary in instructional leadership. Male principals with 3 to 15 years of experience generally indicated that support was urgent in this area (Duncan, 2013).

The problem is that African American male principals are frequently placed in low-achieving schools but are provided limited support beyond programs for new

principals (see Henderson, 2015). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills to improve student academic achievement. The study was conducted with principals working in urban school districts. Nine African American males with at least 5 years of experience were interviewed. All participants were currently serving as principals in urban school districts. Participants were asked about current support they received in instructional leadership, the challenges they experienced for which they need support, and ways they believed instructional leadership support could be strengthened. Data were gathered by means of one-on-one interviews conducted virtually.

Two theories were used as the conceptual framework for this study: the SCCT and the TLT. I encountered several challenges when conducting this study. The number of African American principals with at least 5 years of experience working in urban school districts across the United States is limited. School principals have busy schedules and recruiting enough interview candidates from this population to participate in this study was problematic. The effect of COVID-19 on the educational systems restricted the availability of potential participants and their opportunities to explore the topic. In Chapter 2, literature from researchers and scholars regarding instructional leadership support for African American male principals is reviewed. In Chapter 3, the research design and method for the current study is discussed. In Chapter 4, findings of the study are presented, evaluated, and interpreted. In Chapter 5, the results of the study are discussed, recommendations are made, and conclusions are drawn.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

African American male principals placed in low-achieving schools without the supports needed at various career stages are unlikely to improve school performance (Duncan, 2013). The specific research problem addressed in this study was the lack of support for experienced principals to improve their instructional leadership skills needed to improve student academic achievement. How current African American male principals perceived the support they receive in improving their instructional leadership skills is not clearly understood. Understanding these perceptions is necessary to enhance the opportunity for African American males to maintain leadership roles in low-achieving schools. This understanding will address this gap in the literature and possibly improve performance distinctions through improved student achievement in schools with large populations of African American students.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills to improve student academic achievement. The study was conducted with principals working in urban school districts. Nine African American males with at least 5 years of experience were interviewed. All participants were currently serving as principals in urban school districts. Participants were asked about current support they received in instructional leadership, the challenges they experienced for which they needed support, and ways they believed instructional leadership support could be strengthened.

Data were gathered using one-on-one interviews that I conducted virtually. The interviews provided an opportunity for experienced African American male principals to share their personal perceptions in confidence and to describe their lived experiences regarding the support they have received for instructional leadership, the challenges they faced in improving their instructional leadership, and how their districts could help to improve their support. An interview protocol was used (see Appendix A). Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify themes and patterns that emerged.

In this chapter, the literature related to the problem and purpose is synthesized. The literature review begins with discussing the theoretical framework for this study. Two theories were used to frame this study: SCCT and TLT. The literature review continues with a discussion of ways in which African American male principals have been able to contribute to urban school education and leadership. The value of African American male principals as instructional leaders, and the positive effects on children's education, are reviewed. The review continues with coverage of the underrepresentation of African American principals in leadership roles, along with the effects of principal turnover and retention in urban schools. The support that urban principals receive for instructional leadership skills for school improvement is then discussed. The review explores the needs of principals for support at each stage of their careers, including principals who have established longevity.

Literature Search Strategy

To review the literature for this study, it was necessary to include references prior to 2017 because of the scarcity of research on African American male principals. The

terms used for the search include *transformative learning theory, social cognitive career theory, Black* or *African American male, urban education, principal* or *administrator, supporting Black* or *African American principals* or *administrators, supporting Black* or *African American male principals, urban high school principal, urban school districts, urban leadership, instructional leadership, support* or *mentor, supporting instructional leadership,* and *principal turnover*. Databases included APA Psycinfo, Education Society, Education Source, ERIC, Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, SAGE Journals, SocINDEX, Thoreau Multi-database, Urban Education, and Urban Society. All articles that were a part of the search for the study were peer-reviewed, and a full text of the article was made available. After the conclusion of the search, there were over 85 articles identified and collected for use in this review.

The terms *Black principal, Black school leader,* or *African American principal* or *African American school leader* were used to search in the Education Source, ERIC, and Thoreau Multi-databases. The terms *Black principals* or *African American principals* were used in Education Society, Urban Education, and Urban Society databases. The terms *transformative learning theory* and *social cognitive career theory* were used in the APA Psycinfo, SocINDEX, and SAGE Journals databases, as well as the terms *support* and *mentor*. The terms *Black male principal* and *African American male principal* were used in the Thoreau Multi-database. The Google Scholar database was used to search the terms *supporting instructional leadership* and *principal turnover*. The Urban Education and Urban Society databases were used to search for the terms *urban principal*, *urban*

school districts, and *urban leadership*. The Thoreau Multi-database was most widely used in the iterative search process.

Conceptual Framework

Two theories were used to frame this study: the SCCT and the TLT. The SCCT was originally introduced by Lent et al. (1994). The SCCT is based on the general social cognitive theory, presented by psychologist Bandura (1989). The TLT, originally introduced in 1978 by Mezirow, was the other part of the conceptual framework for the study. The TLT is a critical reflection on one's belief systems that leads to a transformation of one's perspective through self-reflective learning (Baumgartner, 2020). The following is a discussion of these two theories.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

The SCCT emphasizes the cognitive process of choosing a career path based on environmental and social factors, along with self-efficacy, interest, and performance (Hansen & Leuty, 2007). The SCCT, according to Dziak (2020), is a cognitive approach to processing career development continually, by enabling an examination of facets of career selection and development. The SCCT provides a social and psychological process related to investigating, choosing, and succeeding in various careers (Dziak, 2020).

The SCCT was relevant to this study because it can be used to explore how people ultimately achieve success in their chosen careers. This theory provided the necessary framework to determine supports for experienced African American males in their leadership positions in urban school districts. Navarro et al. (2019) identified the SCCT as a framework used to improve the understanding of how personal factors

influenced career development. The SCCT framework was logically connected with the current study because it helped to examine the experiences and perspectives of current Black male principals regarding support for Black males in leadership roles in urban school districts.

The perceptions of experienced African American male principals regarding the support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills were better understood using the SCCT model because of the ability to incorporate various dynamics of the principalship. In similar fashion, Navarro et al. (2019) used the SCCT to further explain how multiple variances were collectively integrated to determine whether career goals were being achieved. Learning what personal and professional supports are needed for African American male principals to meet the goal of being instructional leaders could be achieved by using the SCCT as a conceptual framework for this study.

The logical connection between the SCCT framework and the nature of this study has helped to examine the experiences and perspectives of current African American male principals. Sheu and Lent (2015) indicated that the SCCT was a framework most useful in understanding aspects of career development. The SCCT provides a social and psychological process to improve the understanding of the reasons behind principals' actions to advance and succeed in their careers (Dziak, 2020). The focal point of this study was to uncover what supports African American male principals needed to improve their instructional leadership skills. Using the SCCT as a framework allowed me to encompass multiple factors that Lent and Brown (2008) indicated as well-being, resilience, and coping. The personal conditions of the principals participating in the study

needed to be considered. The level of desire they had to improve their instructional leadership skills was unknown.

If principals lack the desire and/or the resilience to improve their instructional leadership skills, identifying what supports they need will require a framework like the SCCT that encompasses a psychology that deals with job satisfaction (Lent & Brown, 2008). The internal drive necessary to meet the challenges of leading in urban school districts will ultimately determine if any identified supports will be effective in developing instructional leadership skills of African American male principals. In considering how to promote meaning and purpose at work, Lent (2013) noted that the work has to offer meaning and purpose that leads to other positive outcomes.

Transformative Learning Theory

The TLT is a humanistic philosophy that focuses on the individual, the need for support from others in the process of change, and the general belief that people can change (Baumgartner, 2020). The TLT was used in this study to improve the understanding of the perspectives of African American male principals regarding instructional leadership skills. The TLT enables a critical examination of any previously held assumptions of the principals and measured their desire to implement any newly suggested strategies (Baumgartner, 2020). Understanding others' perspectives, critically examining previously held assumptions, and deciding whether to act on the new perspective are the key components of the theory.

The TLT provided a framework to guide my inquiry into the perspectives of current African American male principals on the personal and professional supports

needed to improve their instructional leadership skills. Learning how to improve instructional leadership skills required collaborating with others and reflecting on the learning experiences. Wlodarsky (2018) used the TLT as a framework to determine how the learning of adults was stimulated through the process of reflection. Using the TLT in my study provided a framework to interpret the reflections of African American male principals on their current instructional leadership practices and to gauge their desire to change and enhance current practices.

Urban School Leadership

Exploring the experiences of African American male principals in urban schools allows for deeper engagement and discussion centered on how inner-city schools have become so challenging (DeMatthews, 2016). In urban school leadership it is well known that with an African American leader, students of color at urban schools have improved performance outcomes (Henderson, 2015). However, if the number of African American males seeking principalships continues to decline, the ability of African American males to model strong leadership for African American students will continue to decline as well (Henderson, 2015).

Younger African American males benefit greatly from images of strong African American males in positions of leadership. African American teachers and students have positive experiences and outcomes when under African American male leadership (Fuller et al., 2019). Additionally, violence is reduced when African American males are exposed to traditional Black male role models (Parker & Maggard, 2008). Instructional supports for African American male principals in urban schools are needed to sustain

these principals in leadership positions. An increased understanding of these positive African American male role models could provide an authentic pipeline of success for others (Ononuju, 2016). When there is a pipeline of success for African American male principals, these educational leaders improve student outcomes through culturally responsive leadership practices (Ononuju, 2016). However, despite these improved student outcomes, few studies have been conducted on the African American male in educational leadership (Henderson, 2015).

African American males leading urban schools must make student achievement paramount in their responsibilities. There are many challenges in the urban school principalship. Because African American males play such an important role in leading urban schools, Gooden (2005) believed an ethno-humanist element was present for them to be so invested in their work. African American male principals are most often placed in high-needs schools with many African American male students, and other disadvantaged students as well (Bass & Alston, 2018). Therefore, African American male leaders in urban schools are valuable instructional leaders (Bass & Alston, 2018).

Urban school leadership requires a wide range of skills and abilities to have positive effects on urban schools and student achievement (Dolph, 2017). The effect of instruction on student achievement is well known. However, the perceptions of African American male principals regarding the support they find in urban schools to improve their instructional leadership capacity were unknown. The challenges that urban school leaders face are beyond the school walls and are often beyond the control of school leaders. Urban school leadership is complex and demanding. These complexities and

daily demands of the principalship make the duty challenging for urban school principals.

For principals to advance their knowledge and skill in instruction, professional

development opportunities should be continually pursued (Dolph, 2017).

School principals face challenges regarding working conditions, compensation,

decision making authority, accountability, and professional learning (Levin et al., 2020).

When the responsibilities of the profession begin to overwhelm urban school leaders,

they may begin to leave the profession. As a result, many urban schools are declared

"turnaround schools," which are schools that need instructional and academic

improvement and are undergoing institutional changes (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). In a

phenomenological study examining aspiring principals in a residency program, Woulfin

and Weiner (2019) conceptualized turnaround leadership in terms of the beliefs and

practices reflected by the aspiring leaders. These beliefs and practices were linked with

four "logics" of turnaround leadership: managerial, instructional, trigger change, and

social justice. These logics were used to determine the professional development and

coaching opportunities that could be designed by state and district administrators to

support urban school leaders. The study was critical in bridging research on policy and

leadership with sociology. Woulfin and Weiner indicated that the positive relationships

that shaped the culture of an entire school community were formed by building the

capacity of the leader. The authors found that school leaders should be supported in

meeting the challenges of the work by being provided professional learning opportunities

designed by their school district.

To withstand the difficult circumstances of leading urban school reform, deliberate focus and dedication are necessary in urban school leadership. Dolph (2017) found three areas in need of attention to improve school performance: instructional leadership, understanding the importance of school culture, and a working understanding of how to ensure that the recommended changes to improve academic achievement are properly facilitated. These three leadership skills – instructional leadership, cultural leadership, and change leadership – were found necessary for principals to improve urban schools and raise levels of academic achievement. The study (Dolph, 2017) was designed to serve as a resource for principals, aimed at reforming urban school leadership. Urban school leaders can advance their knowledge and skills by continually seeking professional development (Dolph, 2017).

Taking a more holistic approach to the demands of the leadership position will be required of urban school leaders to address what Flores and Gunzenhauser (2021) described as the opportunity gap. Flores and Gunzenhauser sought to understand how school leaders talked and thought about their practice. The racial disparity and underachievement of students of color is not a result of individual failure, but of the instructional failures of the system (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2021). System failures in urban schools have caused disparities along racial lines, thereby producing gaps in student success and opportunity. As a result, these inconsistencies can be diminished or removed if urban school leaders are aware of the opportunity gap (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2021). Exploring the perceptions of African American male principals of the supports needed to improve their instructional leadership skills could lead to the

sustainability of African American males in the principalship, thereby possibly decreasing the racial disparities in instructionally failing school systems.

By having a disposition to understand the opportunity gap, urban school leaders can develop an awareness of inequalities and methods to eradicate them. Developing the opportunity gap disposition among urban school leaders would nurture a more dedicated emphasis on student learning (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2021). This work is important for urban school leadership because it suggests that an understanding of the opportunity gap on the part of school leaders influences their leadership practices. Shifting the focus from school achievement outcomes to societal, school, and community inputs will significantly affect educational outcomes (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2021). The demand for urban school leaders continues to grow, while the responsibilities continue to evolve. When urban education is continually being reformed, there is a strong need to know how best to prepare urban school leaders.

Urban school leaders are best prepared to lead school reform efforts through a continuum approach for leadership development. To counter the shortage of highly qualified principals, Normore (2007) sought to establish what needed to be done to counter the effect of this shortage and determine the best way to prepare leaders. A succession plan is needed to connect the recruitment strategy with the overall approach in support (Normore, 2007). The three conceptual dimensions of leadership – leadership succession planning, recruitment, and socialization – were found to be unique and meaningful in developing leadership capacity by having more supportive infrastructures across the district (Normore, 2007). Various stages of urban school leadership require

supportive infrastructures, beginning from the recruitment process and providing necessary instructional support to school leaders. The aim of the study was to show that a development and implementation strategy for the school leaders of their school districts should align with more inclusive infrastructures, thereby collectively empowering all leaders (Normore, 2007).

Future efforts to support all leaders in all stages of their leadership development should be consistent across the continuum and support instructional leadership capacity through leadership coaching (Farver & Holt, 2015). Therefore, building the leadership capacity of African American male principals will require some form of coaching. In a qualitative case study examining the practice of three urban school principals, Farver and Holt (2015) analyzed the principals' perceptions of coaching engagements over time. Leadership capacity is built and sustained through executive leadership coaching, which also helps to fill a void of loneliness many leaders possess (Farver & Holt, 2015). The researchers explored ways to facilitate and nurture the leadership practices of urban school principals and found that coaching and evidenced-based professional development built the instructional leadership capacity of school leaders. Entrusting in executive coaching, along with being provided job-embedded professional development, could provide African American male principals with more confidence in developing their instructional leadership skills (Farver & Holt, 2015).

Value of African American Male Principals as Instructional Leaders

The question of African American school leaders in urban high schools has long been placed on the margins of the study of educational administration (Gooden, 2005). It

is widely known that school reform has been a persistent issue in urban schools (Green, 2018). The image of African American males in positions of leadership enhances urban school reform. According to Lomotey (1993), African American male leaders often show compassion, understanding, and a commitment to their students' education and to their communities. Student outcomes have improved through the implementation of effective, culturally responsive leadership practices of African American educational leaders (Ononuju, 2016). Nevertheless, few studies on educational leadership have focused on the African American male (Henderson, 2015). The interpersonal and institutional care practices of African American male principals affect school culture and climate (Bass & Alston, 2018). Therefore, the success of students within a school could be affected by the interpersonal system of care provided from the leader.

African American male principals have been found to be devalued through systemic myths and manipulated perceptions. In a qualitative study designed to learn the belief systems held by African American male principals in urban schools, Henderson (2015) interviewed six African American male public school principals. The goal was to explore what practices shown by African American males in urban school leadership encouraged an effective and enlightening atmosphere and to determine the systemic myths and perceptions that influenced African American male principals. Effective African American male principals employed an integrated leadership style and embraced the ethno-humanist role of being an administrator (Henderson, 2015). Thus, African American male principals embraced an indigenous philosophical system that connected them to African American children. Although social and systemic issues affected the

instructional education and performance of students, effective African American male principals addressed those issues (Henderson, 2015).

Henderson (2015) spoke to the dual role of African American male principals as instructional leaders and systemic connectors. Developing, hiring, and supporting African American male principals would allow this dual role to bring value to African American male principals as instructional leaders. In contrast, structures exist that assist in impeding the improvement of the ability of African American male educators to enter the leadership career and early career development (Miller & Callender, 2018). The presence of structures that hinder the professional development and improvement of African American male principals may be a social justice issue. Linking the struggle for education and social justice for African American leadership was explored from a historical perspective (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). The authors concluded that the historical struggle for African American male principals to instruct the masses effectively would ultimately affect the success of African American children.

Effect of African American Principals on the Success of African American Children

African American principals make a difference for Black students. A study of the effect of African American female principals on African American students (Lomotey, 1993) showed that race and religion affected the leadership of African American female principals. Learning the experiences of African American female principals provides a framework for exploring the real experiences of African American male principals. Several practices were discovered that African American principals could employ to help a diverse student body succeed. Seventeen African American principals were interviewed

(Cornelius, 2016) to explore the effects of cultural leadership on student achievement and social change. The practices employed included double-dosing, pull-out tutorials, after-school tutorials, differentiated instruction, scaffolded learning, and coteaching. Double dosing is a strategy designed to provide students additional courses to increase exposure to tested areas. Pull-out tutorials are a practice in which students are removed from class to work one on one with support staff. After-school tutorials are tutorials conducted either one on one with support staff or by means of whole-group instruction provided to students after normal school hours.

African American principals can also help students succeed by providing differentiated instruction, scaffolded learning, and the coteaching model to meet the academic needs of students (Cornelius, 2016). Differentiated instruction refers to the practice of teaching students the same course content, but using different modalities, depending on individual student need. Scaffolded learning refers to the practice of supporting students in learning the concepts taught, but in layered steps. In the coteaching model, two teachers in the classroom teach the class together. According to Cornelius (2016), to increase student opportunities for academic success, principals' cultural awareness must be improved by equipping them with proven practices. Cornelius established the need to support principals with training in the development of cultural leadership skills. The success of African American children can be influenced through principals' leadership strategies (Henderson, 2015).

Principals should be knowledgeable about culturally proficient leadership strategies to improve student success. This conclusion was reached through a qualitative

study based on the culturally proficient leadership theory (Abraham, 2019). Data were

gathered by means of semistructured interviews with a purposeful sample of high school

principals with successful graduation rates for African American males. Leadership

strategies to increase student achievement among African American males were

identified to determine how these strategies were being implemented and if the strategies

could be replicated in other schools (Abraham, 2019). Additionally, Abraham (2019)

investigated if successful principals used any aspects of culturally proficient leadership.

Findings showed that using certain leadership strategies, high school principals could

close the graduation gap between White and Black males. The study indicated culturally

proficient leadership strategies that gave African American males a voice in schools and

highlighted the crucial role principals played in the success of African American

children. Abraham argued that supporting African American male principals in

developing culturally proficient leadership strategies was required to affect the success of

African American children.

Underrepresentation of African American Male Principals

Although there is much literature on urban schools and principal leadership, little

research has been conducted on the underrepresentation of African American male

principals in leadership roles. Determining how African American male candidates for

the position of principal can access the profession may affect the future development,

experiences, and academic success of African American students in urban high schools

(DeMatthews, 2016). DeMatthews (2016) found that increased engagement and dialogue

helped to sustain African American males in principal positions. An investigation of the

circumstances that lead African American males to become principals was needed to increase the presence of positive Black male images in positions of authority in high-needs schools (DeMatthews, 2016).

Each year, one quarter of U.S. high school principals leave the position, with half leaving after their 3rd year (Superville, 2014). The underrepresentation of African American male candidates in leadership searches and positions may be contributing to the reduction of positive African American male images in positions of authority in urban high schools. School districts across the country could best increase the pool of African American male candidates by increasing the exposure to these candidates (Superville, 2014). African American leadership is underrepresented in both school and district leadership. A noteworthy task in leadership for the American urban public-school system is hiring and keeping African American male principals to serve as positive Black images (Superville, 2014).

Because African American leaders inspire African American students, more representation will give these principals the ability to meet the needs of their student population. To meet those needs, African American leaders will need support in their learning. The central office can support the improvement of instructional leadership skills and the individual learning of principals by "creating environments where principals can learn, innovate, and build culture" (Smith et al., 2020, p. 68).

Identifying reasons that lead African American male principals to remain in instructional leadership positions is necessary. African American male principals either choose, or are often placed in, high-needs schools to oversee the education of African

American males and other disadvantaged students (Bass & Alston, 2018). African American male principals are usually placed in low-achieving schools but are provided limited support beyond programs for new principals. The ability to retain African American male principals depends on the ability to develop their instructional leadership skills. The instructional leadership skills of principals improve when the central office provides an environment for principals to collaborate and learn from each other (Smith et al., 2020). Improving schools with innate biases and challenges is a more stressful expectation in urban principalships than at suburban schools (Gooden, 2005). The development of a principal shortage in the United States (Tran, 2017) could make filling vacancies in urban schools more challenging. There is a need to explore ways to develop a system to produce more urban principals.

Indigenous African American male leadership helped connect the people and their identities to places where they worked or graduated from high school. Ononuju (2016) investigated the leadership and communication practices of African American male administrators in a native urban context. The theory of indigenous African American male leadership provided insight into the experience of urban African American male principals. This theory links circumstances that lead more African American males to the position of principal. One of those links is that African American males become teachers in the community and progress to become principals in the community. However, there are some inherent barriers that limit the opportunity for more African American male principals to be represented.

The greatest barrier for program entry, one that poses a challenge to the occupation of leadership positions, is the licensure examination for principalship. Grissom et al. (2017) found that a substantially higher failure rate was shown for Black candidates, as they performed systematically worse than did their White counterparts on the licensure examination. If policy makers are interested in diversifying the school leadership workforce, consideration should be given to examining licensure performance (Grissom et al., 2017). Wallace and Gagen (2020), describing issues in completing teacher preparation programs for African American males, identified barriers related to enrollment, motivation for selecting the program, and any support provided during the program. According to Wallace and Gagen, retaining African American candidates in teacher preparation programs must begin when education is identified as a major field of study during their undergraduate years. The earlier that students can be identified with an interest in the field of education, the better those individuals can be supported in their matriculation through the program. A university-district collaboration is important for the proper preparation of aspiring principals to improve the academic achievement of students (Sanchez et al., 2019).

There are major implications related to the underrepresentation of African American male principals in leadership positions (Wallace & Gagen, 2020). Although the American public education system across the country is growing more diverse, the underrepresentation of African American males in the principalship continues. Hence, the underrepresentation of African American males in the principalship could be attributed to the number of available African American male teachers. Additionally, there has been a

decline in the number of individuals who aspire to the principalship. If the overall percentage of African American teachers continues to be lower in comparison with the percentage of White teachers, the lack of African American male teachers who could aspire to the principalship becomes even more concerning and problematic. If leadership programs are not redesigning their efforts to develop high-quality school leaders to meet the demands of the principalship (Sanchez et al., 2019), the number of African American male candidates who become school leaders will continue to decline.

White Sanction and the Hiring of African American Male Principals

The notion of White sanction has been found to play a significant role in career entry and the early career development of Black male educators. White sanction refers to the exclusion of Black males from involvement and advancement in leadership positions. Miller and Callender (2018) examined the leadership progression and sustainability of Black male educators. The researchers sought to determine motivating factors for the decisions to become educational leaders, what challenges affected the daily lives of the participants, and what challenges were faced by school leaders. The researchers also sought to discover the leaders' professional view of themselves, as well as how the leaders were supported and coped with challenges (Miller & Callender, 2018). Providing principals with the knowledge of various leadership styles improved their instructional leadership skills, influenced the school's instructional approach, and improved academic results of students (Maponya, 2020).

The study (Miller & Callender, 2018) raised the argument that more Black male school leaders were needed and that having more representation from this group may

help to "illuminate the salience of racism across an increasingly diverse population" (p. 195). The study indicated that limiting and facilitating structures existed for Black male educators to be appointed school leaders. What is not known is whether these findings are consistent with the leadership structures currently in place in the United States. Bailes and Guthery (2020) investigated systematically delayed principal promotions by race and gender to determine the likelihood that assistant principals would be promoted to a principalship. The probability of promotion to school leadership was associated with race and gender. To investigate the underrepresentation of African American male principals, Fuller et al. (2019) explored the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and gender, as a way of understanding how individuals encountered different opportunities and barriers in their employment. The study showed that, even though assistant principals have been rapidly diversified, women and men of color still had a lower chance of becoming principals compared to White men. Although the underrepresentation of African American males in principalships consistently pointed to race as a factor in their limited opportunities to become principals, Cooley and Shen (2000) found other considerations beyond gender and race that led to the underrepresentation of African American male principals in urban school districts.

In terms of the need to diversify leadership positions in public schools, the study by Fuller et al. (2019) is important to public school education and growth. School district leaders responsible for hiring school leaders require an examination of strategies and policies that address unequal access to school leadership positions (Fuller et al., 2019). Examining the hiring processes and practices of school districts, including an

examination of those individuals responsible for the process, could lead to improving the representation of African American males as principals. Cooley and Shen (2000) concluded that there was a need to develop new policy frameworks for school boards and superintendents to consider, possibly including active recruitment and compensation for urban educators.

If limiting leadership structures exist, African American males will need to create counter-systems that provide the necessary support and bonding opportunities to advance in their careers. When African American males are engaged in an environment with other African American males, they develop a greater appreciation of themselves and a heightened sense of mattering (Brooms, 2019). There should be other African American males included, possibly involving the creation of leadership structures that specifically target African American males interested in pursuing the principalship. This need is highlighted because Black principals were found to wait longer for promotion when compared to White assistant principals and were less likely to be promoted (Bailes & Guthery, 2020).

African American men were able to learn from other Black men while being provided a critical space to hear, share, and learn (Brooms, 2019). The representation of African American male principals in leadership roles is improved by creating systems that support their learning, growth, and development. Many structures and systems in place to transform principals' instructional practices need to be examined and changed (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Systems that support the instructional transformation of African American male principals are outnumbered by systems in place that cause African

American males to be least likely to be promoted to the principalship (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Additionally, the underrepresentation of African American male principals could be the result of a lack of succession planning, a failure to forecast vacancies, and the inability of candidates to plan for promotion (Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018). Research has suggested that when considering recruitment of African American males for leadership positions, district leaders should have a consistent and unified strategic succession plan (Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018).

The first step in improving instructional leadership for African American principles is to increase their representation in leadership positions. This representation would improve if accountability models were put in place (Fuller et al., 2019). Increasing representation of African American males is important because teachers and students of color are positively influenced by leaders of color (Fuller et al., 2019). Bailes and Guthery (2020) noted the importance of having African American principals to close achievement gaps. However, hiring African American principals is only one phase in improving the instructional leadership skills that affect the teaching and learning process. Instructional management tools used by principals have a positive influence on the academic achievement of students (Maponya, 2020). Therefore, the next phase to improve principals' instructional leadership skills and representation should include an ongoing program to develop instructional leadership skills continually and to have a leadership succession model in place that includes a minority principal pipeline.

The Leadership Succession and Minority Principal Pipeline

The recruitment, selection, and instructional development of principals are vital components to improving representation and instructional leadership skills. Individuals seeking administrative positions found planning for promotion difficult because the school district had failed to plan and was unable to forecast vacancies. Peters-Hawkins et al. (2018) sought to determine if a dynamic leadership succession process existed in a local high school. District and building-level administrators were interviewed to determine district leadership policies, strategies, and practices. The study revealed that school district leaders had to develop a cohesive succession plan for individuals seeking administrative positions for candidates to plan properly and prepare to occupy leadership positions. Coincidentally, giving particular attention to males of color would be beneficial to the student population.

Positive self-images for males of color improved when male educators of color served as positive role models (Wallace & Gagen, 2020). Thus, reference to a native pipeline to the principalship (Ononuju, 2016) could be significant in establishing sustainability in the position. The recruitment of males must begin before the students become interested in attending college (Wallace & Gagen, 2020). The recruitment of males should begin while they are still connected to the community where they live (Ononuju, 2016). Consequently, by adding an African American male educator, the academic achievement of young African American males would improve through the development of positive self-images (Wallace & Gagen, 2020). Diverse approaches among diverse communities should be adopted to improve schools (Wilkinson et al.,

2019). There is an importance to African American male leadership, yet there is a scarcity of African American male principals. Thus, there is a need to learn how African American leaders acquire leadership positions and what keeps them there (Miller & Callender, 2018).

Developing stronger collaborations across the school district that support leadership development and create opportunities for principals to grow (Smith et al., 2020) is how school districts can improve representation and instructional leadership skills of African American male principals. To strengthen the principal pipeline, S. W. Lee and Mao (2020) critically reviewed studies conducted on principal recruitment and selection. After examining characteristics of individuals who applied and were selected as principals, both individual and organizational factors led to the continuing disadvantage of minority educators, compared with their White peers (S. W. Lee & Mao, 2020). The study raised attention to the processes and practices that led to recruiting and hiring effective leaders. According to S. W. Lee and Mao, because minority educators rarely have opportunities to acquire the necessary support and encouragement to enter the principalship, a minority principal pipeline should be given more attention. However, a minority principal pipeline would not be able to materialize if Black and Latino males are not attending college (Knight-Manuel et al., 2019). The high-school-to-college pipeline for Black and Latino male students would need to be strengthened because Black and Latino boys continue to experience limited access to higher education. If African American males do not go to college, they cannot become principals.

Regarding a minority principal pipeline, there are serious racial/ethnic and gender inequities in the process of becoming a principal (Davis et al., 2017). There is a low probability that teachers of color will become principals, and some researchers (e.g., Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Fuller et al., 2019) noted a systemic bias that influenced the pathways to the principalship for African Americans. However, not all research findings in this area have been consistent. According to Davis et al. (2017), educators of color have an advantage over their White peers in becoming a principal. Davis et al. (2017) conducted one of the rare studies that have suggested that educators of color experience an increased likelihood of becoming principals. More promising findings such as this would be encouraging for African American males to be a part of a minority pipeline to improve the presence of African American males as principals.

Preparing School Leaders

Learning what pathway principals follow for the principalship and how they are being prepared is key in determining the preparation of future leaders to cope with the rigors of the position (Mette et al., 2017). Mette et al. (2017) initiated a nationwide qualitative study to describe the landscape of school leadership preparation programs (SLPP) that serve as pathways to the principalship. The researchers sought to discover the types of pathways and delivery modes to the principalship used and offered in SLPPs. Every postsecondary institution that received U.S. federal student aid from 2013 to 2018 provided data on the number of degrees and certificates awarded.

Study findings (Mette et al., 2017) showed that the most common route to the principalship was a master's degree, which had double the number of offerings compared

to certification. African American males are more likely to gain entrance into the principalship by obtaining a master's degree as part of their SLPP (Mette et al., 2017). In measuring the effect of leadership preparation programs, the authors sought to inform decisions about what pathways and modalities to offer in SLPPs, which can shape pathways and modalities best suited to improve the representation of African American males in principal leadership positions. However, regardless of the effectiveness of SLPPs, the ability to recruit, employ, and maintain African American males in teaching positions is vital to improving the representation of African American males in principal leadership positions.

Ingersoll et al. (2019) investigated the minority teacher shortage by using nationally representative data to examine the recruitment, employment, and retention of minority and nonminority schoolteachers from the late 1980s to 2013. The study determined the locations of employed minority teachers and identified teacher turnover rates and sources. The study documented the experience of minority teachers and their ability to remain in positions. Although the widespread effort to recruit more minority teachers and employ them in disadvantaged schools has been successful when compared to recruitment of White teachers, minority teachers were found to have significantly higher turnover (Ingersoll et al., 2019). This finding is important because minority teachers overwhelmingly serve in urban public schools with high poverty, high-minority populations. Reasons such as job dissatisfaction and desiring a better job were given as causes for the high turnover rate of minority teachers. However, a full understanding of all conditions associated with high turnover rates is needed. To improve the

representation of African American males in principal leadership positions, the retention of minority teachers should be emphasized. The minority teacher turnover rate is concerning when considering the number of opportunities African American males have to become principals. However, once the principalship has been obtained in urban schools, principal turnover/retention is an additional concern to African American males in leadership roles.

Supporting the Instructional Leadership Skills of Urban Principals

To support effective leadership, it is important to reveal circumstances that lead to retaining African American male principals in urban schools. The number of responsibilities and the overall stress of the principal's position may be reasons why many are choosing to leave the position. Turnover of school leadership leads to difficulties in preparing the next generation of urban school principals (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). In an effort to improve the understanding of principal turnover, Levin et al. (2020) surveyed 424 secondary-school principals across the United States. The researchers arranged the school principals in six focus groups with 33 school leaders from 26 states. The study found that federal, state, and local systems contributed to conditions that did not support principals (Levin et al., 2020). The study outlined reasons why keeping principals in schools was crucial. The researchers noted that school climate was enhanced, student outcomes improved, and teacher quality and retention improved when principals stayed in schools. State and district leaders will need to implement strategies to improve principal retention (Levin et al., 2020). An investment will need to be made into supporting principals to keep them in positions.

An important aspect of supporting principals is through leadership development programming. In an effort to explore leadership development programs for school principals, Tingle et al. (2019) examined principals who had completed their first 4 years of the principalship. A qualitative study was conducted using a purposeful sample of 15 principals in their 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year working in a large urban school district. The researchers examined what professional development training activities were viewed as effective within their first 4 years. Principals participated in semistructured interviews and completed a survey to examine program effectiveness and influence. Findings of the study showed that instructional leadership influenced principals' effectiveness for turnaround schools (Tingle et al., 2019). Additionally, the school culture and the principal's overall effectiveness were enhanced by building relationships with peers and obtaining support from the supervisor or mentor (Tingle et al., 2019).

The turnover rate of principals will continue to grow at a more rapid pace if supports are not examined and adjusted to suit individual principal needs. Tingle et al. (2019) analyzed the question of whether the way principals were supported within their first 4 years influenced their effectiveness as leaders. Principals who are not supported within the initial years of the position with leadership development programming were found to risk underperforming as school leaders. Tingle et al. found that adjusting leadership development should be considered after continually surveying principals and examining supports they need.

Developing a self-care method to improve turnover and retention rates of principals may need to be considered. Walker (2020) explored strategies that Jamaican

school principals used to manage their work-related stress and anxiety. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 Jamaican secondary-school principals who worked in rural, urban, and inner-city schools. Walker sought to determine how principals maintained their well-being and how the compromising aspects of the principalship affected their well-being. An intensive lack of resources caused Jamaican school principals to experience work-related stress and anxiety (Walker, 2020). However, principals' primary source of support was found in their spiritual belief and engagement in mindfulness meditation (Walker, 2020). As Walker noted, other studies being conducted on principals' mental health and well-being are needed because of an increased rate of suicide among educators. Based on the reports of the study, I argue that to reduce the turnover rate and improve the retention rate of urban school principals, consideration should be given to implementing mindfulness meditation training within the first 4 years of the principalship.

Individuals who supervise school leaders also play a major role in the quest to improve principal turnover and retention rates. Understanding how school leaders are being supervised could show how to improve principals' experiences and improve retention rates. Thessin and Louis (2019) explored how worldwide agencies supported the capacity of school leaders to support teachers and students. The study investigated how district central offices support principals' instructional leadership efforts and how changes to the principalship influenced middle-tier agents supporting and evaluating school leaders. Based on the previous 15 years of research, Thessin and Louis noted that the middle-tier office was important to the systemic support of school leaders. How

supervisors evaluate and support school leaders is key to the turnover and retention rates of the principalship. School districts have an obligation to understand how the role of supporting principals is aligned with the shifting role of the principalship. If principals are provided evolving feedback and support, there will be potential for student outcomes to increase (Thessin & Louis, 2019).

The principalship has become a challenging and intense existence for many individuals who have chosen the profession. The leadership of principals significantly affects student achievement (Thessin & Louis, 2019). How principals are supported in their instructional leadership skills will directly influence their ability to support the teachers' instructional development and growth.

Several studies (e.g., Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Yavuz & Gülmez, 2018; Zepeda & Lanoue, 2017) have explored the notion of supporting principals in improving their instructional leadership skills. These studies provided general insights into what type of support was needed and provided to leadership positions. What is limited in the research is specific ways to support urban male principals in their instructional leadership skills. Both the general construct of supporting principals and more specific searches identifying other supports consistent to the needs of urban principals are important for understanding how to support this particular group of professionals.

Principals were found to perceive coaching as a benefit to thinking, planning, and problem solving. In a qualitative case study, Farver and Holt (2015) identified recurring themes regarding how urban principals valued leadership support. In-depth interviews and direct observations were conducted with three urban school principals. The study was

conducted in an urban school district that provided principals an executive leadership coach. This study was important in identifying valuable supports to urban school principals. Participants expressed the view that coaching was necessary as a strategy to support principals in urban schools.

Prior to the administration of executive coaching, a more modest approach to consider when supporting principals' instructional leadership skills would be to explore how well school districts and universities are partnered in preparing school principals. In a qualitative case study, Williams et al. (2020) investigated the vital components of a high-functioning principal preparation program that centered around the relationship between the school district and the university. Semistructured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with influential people responsible for creating principal preparation programs. The goal was to discover how the partnership developed despite personal challenges and other difficulties that occurred. Additionally, the goal was to discover how the partnership maintained its trust and level of success.

The findings (Williams et al., 2020) revealed that successful partnerships had trusting environments created when people worked together to achieve established purpose and goals. However, the study did not explore how university partnerships were designed to help prepare principals who were planning to work in urban school settings. Principal preparation programs may be sustained through effective partnerships with school districts, but how the partnerships effectively prepare urban school leaders is unknown. How to provide effective preparation and support for school principals

working in urban school districts and high-needs schools will require further investigation.

Instructional leadership teams (ILT) have been used for school improvement, with the support of school principals. In a mixed-method study, Thessin et al. (2020) used the internal coherence framework to determine how much principal supervisors interacted with the ILTs of the school building in high-needs schools. The goal of the study was to determine how much interaction focused on school improvement and the team members' perceptions of the school leadership (Thessin et al., 2020). Interviews, observations, and surveys were used to determine the depth of the principal supervisors' interactions with ILTs. In addition, the consistency of actions with how ILT member perceptions was observed. Findings revealed that the more principal supervisors interacted with the ILT, the more team members perceived that the school was able to improve (Thessin et al., 2020). To meet the demands of improving classroom instruction, the distributive leadership model was emphasized to assist school leaders. Additionally, student achievement was found to improve when a productive partnership was established between school principals and principal supervisors that allowed supervisors to work more closely with ILT teams (Thessin et al., 2020).

The study (Thessin et al., 2020) was noteworthy for focusing on the principal's supervisor directly influencing how principals were supported in high-needs schools. The study provided a new concept in how principals were supported as instructional leaders. Thessin et al. (2020) introduced an indirect concept into how to support principals, with principal supervisors providing direct support to an ILT established by using the

distributive leadership model. Principals hold the second greatest influence on student achievement behind direct classroom instruction (Thessin et al., 2020). The study (Thessin et al., 2020) allows for individuals in educational leadership to understand the value in the relationship between principal supervisors and principals. Urban school districts that have high-needs schools will improve student achievement by shifting the focus of principal supervisors' work to developing the instructional leadership capacity of the principal (Thessin et al., 2020). This idea holds especially true in school districts that have turnaround schools.

To understand the dynamics of the partnership of central office leaders and school principals, Thessin (2021) explored this partnership by looking at the unified system of operations used to improve principals' overall learning and development. It is clear in the literature (Thessin, 2021; Thessin et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020) that the relationship between principal supervisors and principals will yield positive results for principals, students, and staff if a trusting partnership has developed. Principal supervisors and principals engaging in a collective effort to improve the practice of the principal is a new concept to which school districts must begin to adjust.

Succeeding in bringing people to work together in situations when one is the supervisor over the other can prove to be a challenging task if either is not skilled or engaged in joint work. Thessin (2021) conducted a qualitative study to examine how joint work affected principals' overall learning and skill development. In a 16-month study that included five principal supervisors and 12 principals, Thessin conducted two interviews, each between 50 and 90 minutes long, with each participant. Various case-

study methodologies were used to explore how principals were able to develop their personal learning while working collaboratively with a principal supervisor in different situations. The situated learning theory and the developmental utility of learning in group settings were used to investigate the joint work. Thessin sought to identify the key work tasks that involved both subjects working together and determining which situational contexts involved both the principal supervisor and the principal. Findings revealed many benefits that formed as a result of having a joint partnership between principal supervisors and principals. When supervisors and principals engaged in joint work while working with school-based teams, both took responsibility for improvement in instruction and developed strategies to assist principals (Thessin, 2021).

It is apparent through the literature review that central office administrators in school districts across the country must evolve and offer direct support to principals. Because of the urgency of this necessary transformation of operations, Thessin (2021) recommended the initiation of a federal policy and funds to support and refine the joint partnership of the principal supervisor and the principal. The sense of urgency in Thessin's recommendations may be the result of his extensive research on the principal/principal supervisor partnership. In an earlier study, Thessin (2019) wanted to understand the dynamics of this partnership by determining how the principal developed as an instructional leader. The ability for principals to develop as instructional leaders could serve as the foundation for schools to improve academically. However, the responsibility for principals to develop the necessary instructional skills to improve academic performance of students should not be the sole responsibility of the principal.

The partnership with principal supervisors plays a key role in developing instructional leaders.

The principal supervisor and principal were shown to collaborate successfully and to develop a productive partnership when they brought their own uniqueness to the partnership. Over a 16-month period, a qualitative study (Thessin, 2019) examined 12 principal supervisor/principal partnerships to determine each individual's instinctive attributes that facilitated a meaningful experience of collaboration and development. Changes in the instructional leadership practices of the principal were found as a result of the joint work between the principal supervisor and the principal (Thessin, 2019). The study was important to learn how to support instructional leadership skills for principals because a productive partnership with the principal's supervisor is clearly paramount to the overall success of the school.

The recommendation to develop a productive partnership during collaborative work between principal supervisors and principals for schools in urban settings with a high-needs status is clear (Thessin, 2019). Leaders of urban school districts can influence school principals' instructional leadership growth and practices by appropriately selecting and assigning principal supervisors. Providing opportunities for principal supervisors and principals to establish professional partnerships will assist in establishing the joint work necessary to improve instructional leadership practices (Thessin, 2019).

The ability for principals in urban school districts to become more effective as instructional leaders lies in the support provided by central office leadership. In an effort to improve the understanding of the supports needed for principals in urban school

districts, Honig (2012) examined how central office administrators supported principals' instructional leadership development and what conditions assisted or impeded the process. According to Honig, little evidence showed what the central office did specifically with principals in urban settings that supported their instructional leadership development. Data were gathered from 283 interviews and approximately 265 observational hours to determine how much central office administrators engaged in five specific practices: focusing on joint work, modeling, developing and using tools, brokering, and creating and sustaining social engagement. When central office administrators are grounded in shared responsibility and consistent in implementing specific practices, the instructional leadership capacity of the principal improves (Honig, 2012). Principal supervisors were most helpful engaged in explicit instructional practices (Stosich, 2020). Urban districts will need to take new approaches in the partnership between office staff members and school principals to develop instructional leaders systematically (Thessin, 2021).

A review of the literature revealed consistencies relevant to urban, suburban, and rural areas. There were no differences in public or private educational settings in terms of what was needed to support instructional leadership growth and development. In addition, there is no nationwide structure in place in the United States that systematically supports the learning of school principals. Although Germany does not have a nationwide plan, researchers determined that mandatory professional learning structures during the principalship were needed to support all principals (Tulowitzki, 2019).

In contrast, Norway and Sweden have a nationwide program designed to support educational leadership. Aas and Paulsen (2019) examined the national strategy for supporting instructional leadership for school principals to help define the practices that improved and developed their instructional leadership. In a 28-month study that used two separate data sets, Aas and Paulsen gathered documents used by participants reflecting on their learning, and the new leadership practices, to determine how the national leadership program built the instructional leadership capacity of principals. This study was important to the field of education in the United States because it outlined a national strategy being implemented that would support a significant number of students. Having a national standard in this area could help to decrease the learning gap that exists along racial makeups in this country. Findings of the study showed that how school district administrators viewed leadership programs and how support was offered were crucial for principal development. The capability for principals to grow, develop, and transform is achieved through leadership programs that provide opportunities for safe practice and reflection (Aas & Paulsen, 2019). If improved student learning is the ultimate objective of school principals, a system-wide development of program offerings to assist in the transformation of principals is necessary to meet this objective. Leadership programs in Scandinavian countries such as Norway and Sweden showed that instructional leadership involved collaboration and a systemic approach to leadership that provides space for reflection and change.

In an effort to deepen a worldview on the topic of supporting principals, instructional leadership practices in Australia were explored. Qualitative research was

conducted to examine two case studies using the theory of practice architectures. Wilkinson et al. (2019) sought to determine the measures that either helped or restricted the development of instructional leadership practices in two Australian Catholic secondary schools and district offices. Researchers examined how school leaders were being supported in response to system-wide reform efforts. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, focus groups, and classroom and coaching observations (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Findings revealed that the entire instructional support system of a districts would need to be analyzed and reformed to alter the instructional leadership practices of school principals. Additionally, the conditions put in place by district leaders that transformed instructional leadership practices must be examined and changed to optimize principals' instructional practices (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Thus, a review of the literature from several countries clarifies that principals need systemic support from central office administrators that begins with establishing a meaningful working relationship between principal supervisors and principals. An aspect of the working relationship between principal supervisors and principals would be leadership-focused coaching. To understand of this type of support, Gray (2018) examined leadership-focused coaching (LFC) as a support provided by university faculty for individuals aspiring to the principalship. This model of support provides prospective instructional leaders with mentors and coaches specifically chosen to help strengthen their leadership capacity and skill development while engaged in authentic experiences. The study focused on developing and supporting principals' instructional leadership skills effectively when they were aspiring school leaders. The LFC model provided aspiring

school leaders opportunities to establish personal goals that incorporated exploration and innovation as they developed their leadership skills (Gray, 2018). Findings of the research determined that as a result of the LFC model, an improved partnership between school districts and universities would provide an opportunity for aspiring and veteran school leaders a method to learn from both coursework and fieldwork.

In brief, the literature shows that supporting principals to improve their instructional leadership skills begins with the development of a meaningful partnership between universities and school districts and is maintained by developing a meaningful partnership between principal supervisors and principals. There was a gap in knowledge of the perceptions of current African American principals regarding how they were supported by the central office in improving their instructional leadership skills. Research was needed to explore these perceptions. Therefore, it was imperative that researchers learn from this group of educators because African American male principals address broad social and systemic issues that affect student education (Henderson, 2015).

Career Stage Needs of Principals

Learning what supports are needed to assist African American male principals in their continued skill development and growth could positively affect the number of years they remain in leadership positions. As principals progress in the number of years working in the same position, their behaviors change over time and their leadership style must adapt (Oplatka, 2004). In a descriptive study involving 52 females and 117 males divided into four experience ranges, Duncan (2013) explored professional development needs of U.S. principals based on the different career stages. Although gender differences

were a part of the study exploration, the information gathered is beneficial to understanding what principals need to develop skills throughout their tenure. As Duncan noted, continual professional and personal development throughout an entire career is how principals succeed. By gathering information directly from principals to determine what professional development was most important based on where they were personally and in their professional careers, the study was able to provide meaningful findings and conclusions. A questionnaire was used to determine what principals perceived as professional development needs. Duncan noted that although principals had a strong desire to develop their knowledge and expertise, their needs differed based on their different career stages.

Interestingly, findings (Duncan, 2013) also showed differences in priorities in what male and females needed for support. For example, male principals with 3 to 15 years of experience viewed instructional leadership as a higher priority than female principals did. This study indicates specific professional development needs for male principals beyond the principal's initial years. Although addressing the needs of beginning principals is generally the focus of school districts, the study (Duncan, 2013) was able to provide a range of perspectives that can assist districts in refocusing their support efforts. Because principals require different things to learn at different stages throughout their careers, different areas of professional development are required to sustain personal motivation (Duncan, 2013).

Principals in all stages of their career are able to learn, develop, and grow as instructional leaders in the principalship. The principalship is a position of major

importance and consequence in the educational system, largely because principals have to manage many responsibilities. Oplatka (2010) explored the experiences of principals in the later stages of their careers to determine differences in perspectives on principals' abilities to change, grow, and progress. Semistructured interviews were conducted with K–12 teachers, principals, and principal supervisors to provide a diverse group of participants. The goal was to determine the needs, motivations, and important tasks in which late-career principals were most engaged (Oplatka, 2010).

Findings of the study (Oplatka, 2010) are influential in learning more about principal needs because this research is about principals in their late careers. According to Oplatka (2010), research specifically on late careers in the principalship is scarce worldwide. Although learning from principals in the late stages of their careers could provide strategies to support experienced principals, what African American male principals in the late stages of their careers may need is unknown. Notably, Oplatka found that the older the principals were in age and longevity, the more energy they exhibited on the job, and the more respect they received from others. The findings could shape how districts approach the professional development needs of principals to adapt to new leadership styles during their later years. Because principals late in their careers have a high degree of confidence and belief in themselves (Oplatka, 2010), basing professional development on their career stage could be effective in transforming leadership styles in later years of the principalship.

To investigate career stages in educational leadership, Oplatka (2004) analyzed principals' perspectives, challenges, and assumptions as they progressed through their

careers. The goal of the empirical study was to show how the instructional leadership capacity and leadership styles of principals were influenced by their career stage. District officials could address professional development needs by considering the career stages of principals. Findings of the study (Oplatka, 2004) indicated that principals in midcareer needed to focus on an instructional leadership style. There was a gap in the literature regarding how African American male principals are supported to improve their instructional leadership skills to develop their instructional leadership style.

If African American male principals are expected to meet the challenges of sustainability in the principalship, training based on their career stage will assist the leader in becoming more compatible with the leadership style necessary for success (Oplatka, 2004). In an investigation into the career stages and performance of school leaders, Earley and Weindling (2007) explored the relationship between the longevity and performance of the school leader. The 20-year longitudinal study of secondary headteachers was designed to determine how school leaders remained interested in staying in leadership positions. Findings of the study suggested supporting school leaders by requiring the implementation of fixed-term contracts once school leaders had progressed through stages of their careers. However, there is some concern with the findings of the study (Earley & Weindling, 2007) if how fluidly school leaders navigate the career cycle is considered. When principals move unpredictably between stages of their careers because of new understandings, basing contract terms on an assumed linear progression through career stages seems to diminish the cognitive ability of the school leader (Oplatka, 2010).

Summary/Conclusion

The dialogue on urban education in the United States is continual. Developing a better understanding of African American male principals will support sustainability in the position and positively affect teacher development and student achievement. How school districts strategically support African American male principals is key to the development of their instructional leadership skills. If district leaders make intentional efforts to acquire and support African American male school leaders throughout their professional careers, outcomes for the school will be positive. School leaders will need direct instructional support and school-level involvement from their supervisors to improve the development of their instructional skills. School leaders also benefit from recognition of leadership styles that correlate with the stage of their careers.

In this study, the SCCT and the TLT were used to understand the school leader as a human being and to determine what career development supports are needed from the school district. The literature showed a need to explore the perceptions of African American male principals regarding the support they are receiving, and what is missing in what they are receiving, so that this support can be strengthened. In Chapter 3, the methodology and design for this exploration are presented.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they receive to improve their instructional leadership skills to improve student academic achievement. The study was conducted with principals working in urban school districts. Nine African American males with at least 5 years of experience were interviewed. All participants were currently serving as principals in urban school districts. Participants were asked about current support they received in instructional leadership, the challenges they experienced for which they needed support, and ways they believed instructional leadership support could be strengthened.

Data were gathered using one-on-one interviews conducted virtually. The interviews provided an opportunity for experienced African American male principals to share their personal perceptions in confidence and to describe their lived experiences regarding the support they have received for instructional leadership, the challenges they have faced in improving their instructional leadership, and how their districts could help to improve their support. An interview protocol was used (see Appendix A). Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify themes and patterns that emerged.

Chapter 3 presents the research method used for this study. The research design and rationale are first presented. In this section, the research questions for the study are presented, and the choice of a basic qualitative study is explained. In the next section, the role of the researcher is discussed, including biases and ethical issues involved in this study. The methodology is explained, including the population and sample, participant

selection, and data collection and analysis plan. Issues of trustworthiness are discussed, including credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and ethical procedures used. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions that guided the study were derived from the study problem and purpose. The purpose in addressing the research questions was to gain understanding through the perspectives of experienced African American male principals in an urban school district. The research questions are the following.

RQ1: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the support they receive for improving their instructional leadership skills?

RQ2: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the challenges they experience with gaining instructional leadership support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills?

RQ3: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe ways to improve the instructional leadership support they need for their leadership?

The central phenomenon examined in this study was the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills. I focused on examining these perceptions. I used a basic qualitative method, with data gathered by means of semistructured interviews. Using a basic qualitative research method provides the ability to analyze complex actions

and develop meaning through a descriptive and analytic process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Qualitative research is conducted in an attempt to understand an individual, a group, or a

phenomenon in a natural setting in a manner accurately reflecting the meaning based

upon the experiences of the individuals or groups. This investigation of the perceptions of

experienced African American male principals regarding their needs for improving their

instructional leadership skills was aided through qualitative research.

The basic qualitative approach enabled an understanding of the perspectives of

experienced African American male principals regarding the supports needed to improve

their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement.

The use of a basic qualitative approach was determined by the purpose of the study.

Other qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology or a case study, would not have

been optimal for this research. Phenomenology is a research approach designed to

understand human reaction and analyze people's perceptions. However, the goal of the

current study was not to understand how experienced African American male principals

are reacting to a phenomenon. The goal was to explore the perceptions of experienced

African American principals regarding the support they have received to improve their

instructional leadership skills. In addition, a case study would have required a broader

approach and would have involved multiple layers of data gathering involving the

structure of the school districts. Such a design would have expanded beyond the scope of

the problem and purpose of the study.

A basic qualitative approach was best suited to understand the needs of a small

group of experienced African American male principals for instructional leadership

support. Because I was seeking to understand the views and responses of the people involved in the study by identifying recurring patterns or themes, conducting in-depth qualitative interviewing was the most appropriate strategy. The most practical and flexible way to address the research problem, while in the most naturalistic setting possible, was to conduct semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews, the most widely used data collection method in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016), provide the opportunity to know the opinions, perspectives, and experiences of the study participants. The main goal of conducting interviews is to obtain a clear understanding of individuals' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Additionally, interviews are effective ways of collecting rich, descriptive qualitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

In the current study, the qualitative research method provided an opportunity for me to fill the role of the researcher by learning about participants' experiences and perceptions through conversations (see Patton, 2015). As the sole researcher, I used a basic qualitative approach because I was interested in the participants' perceptions as I sought to understand their lived experiences. I gathered data through semistructured, one-on-one interviews with nine experienced African American principals and interpreted the data to make detailed discoveries and gain insights (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). All responses were recorded and transcribed verbatim, using collected field notes as a supplement. I created codes by analyzing the transcripts to identify common patterns or themes. I assigned categories to generate insightful questions. After a thorough analysis, I reported the results of the data analysis as I interpreted the findings.

As a school principal, I may have had previous professional interactions with potential participants through networking meetings, state-wide meetings, and/or national conferences. The integrity of the research was maintained by having interactions with study participants only in professional settings and for the sole purpose of the study. When I gathered data, I bracketed my own reactions to maintain neutrality, and I made every effort to minimize personal bias. To ensure that I was not influenced by being an equal colleague of research participants, I worked to be aware of and appropriately handled any bias I may have had because of any previous professional relationships with participants. I did not communicate details about this study to potential participants until I had received approval from the institutional review board (IRB) to conduct the study. To further guard against bias, I showed both the transcripts and the written report to a professional colleague for review.

I did not hold any authority over the participants, as I was of equal professional status with each of the participants. A positive working relationship with study participants was maintained during the interviews with the principals. Any preconceived notions about the study outcome were bracketed to minimize bias in the research. The process of reflexivity in writing my thoughts was used to examine how my research decisions may be affected by any explicit and implicit assumptions. After IRB approval to conduct the study, I identified participants and invited them to participate in the study. Included in the communication were informed consent information, a statement of the purpose of the study, and an opportunity to ask any questions that may have arisen.

Methodology

Participation Selection Logic

The participants included nine experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts with at least 5 years of experience as a principal. Resources for finding participants who met the sampling criteria included the LinkedIn and Facebook social media sites, along with contacting colleagues whom I knew from my professional interactions, from attendance at national organization events for secondary school principals, and from professional interactions with colleagues outside of the national organization. Principals were required to have at least 5 years of experience because these principals would have already developed and established their instructional leadership skills. Specifically understanding what experienced principals needed to improve their instructional leadership skills was central to the purpose of this study because support for improvement may have been limited.

There are no firm rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015). Based on the nature of the study, the sample size in qualitative research varies (Creswell, 2013). The sample size depends on the purpose of the study, the needs for establishing credibility, and how time and resources will be used. A small sample size is enabled by a homogenous group to which all participants belong, to describe the particular homogenous group in depth (Patton, 2015). To determine whether potential participants met the study criteria, all potential participants were asked to detail their current position and their years of experience working as principals in an urban school district.

After the IRB of Walden University approved the request to conduct the research, an email or letter of invitation was sent to individuals identified as potential participants (see Appendix B). The invitation introduced the purpose of the study, provided a description of participation, and indicated the anticipated duration of the interviews. Any potential risks or interruptions to the workday while participating were also addressed in the introductory invitation. The confidentiality of the participants and measures to secure the data were provided in a privacy statement that also outlined the benefits of the study. I followed up with every principal from whom I had received an initial response, but had not received a commitment, requesting a reply within 3 business days.

Information approved by the Walden University IRB was emailed to each participant. When the participant selection period closed, I scheduled individual interview times with each principal. Participants were told that they were free to refuse to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering and that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the process without consequence. Participants had the opportunity to contact me by email if they had any questions.

Instrumentation

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument for the study (see Creswell, 2014). To present the interview questions, I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A). An interview protocol is a guide for the interviewer, rather than an instrument for measuring data (Yin, 2015). The interview protocol involved a limited number of questions in advance, with follow-up questions used to explore participant responses in further depth. Research questions, the interview protocol, recorded virtual interviews,

reflective notes, and transcriptions related to the study purpose were used to gather data. Two handheld Olympus audio recording devices were used to ensure full recording of the interviews.

Because the interview protocol in a qualitative study is not an instrument, concepts such as content validity cannot accurately be applied to it (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Yin, 2015). To ensure that the interview protocol was sufficient for data collection, the interview questions in the interview protocol were organized according to the individual research questions. Research Question 1 was addressed through Interview Questions 1, 2, and 5 of the protocol. Research Question 2 was addressed through Interview Questions 3, 8, and 9 of the protocol. Research Question 3 was addressed through Interview Questions 4, 6, and 7 of the protocol.

The interview protocol, which was developed for this study, was based on the research literature. The protocol was designed to provide answers to the research questions and to provide consistency among the interviews. The sufficiency of data collection was verified by a review of the protocol conducted by educational experts, who provided feedback on how well the protocol addressed the research questions. A field test was conducted by means of pilot interviews with three experts in the field of instructional leadership. This field test provided a qualitative equivalent to the quantitative concept of content validity. The interview protocol was reviewed by another principal who did not participate in the study but who worked in an urban school district. This process ensured that the interview protocol process was clear and relevant in addressing the research questions of the study.

Interviews served as the primary data sources. Qualitative data analysis (QDA) software was not used, but personal transcription was used to transcribe and code the data after collecting participant insights and perceptions. Data were gathered during interviews with the participants. The data gathered from the semistructured interviews were used to identify themes to be explored during the research. All information and data collected during the research is locked in my home office. After 5 years, the collected data and audio recordings will be physically destroyed or electronically erased.

The length of the interviews was no more than 45 minutes but was based on the interviewee's responses. Two handheld Olympus audio recording devices were used to ensure full recording of the interviews. Audio recordings of participant interviews from handheld devices were immediately transcribed after each interview using the Microsoft Word transcription application.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Before the study began, IRB approval #04-27-22-478094 from Walden University was obtained. Requests for permission involved an explanation of the purpose of the study, which was to explore the perceptions of African American principals regarding the support they needed to improve their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement. Resources for finding participants who met the sampling criteria included the LinkedIn and Facebook social media sites and by contacting colleagues whom I knew from my professional interactions, from attendance at national organization events, and from professional interactions with colleagues outside of the

national organization. Membership lists were not accessed or used for finding participants who met the sampling criteria.

After the Walden University IRB granted permission to conduct the study, participants were recruited. Participants must have had a minimum of 5 years of experience as a principal within an urban school setting. After potential participant information was received, I extended an invitation to every qualified candidate to participate in the study. After the consent to participate was received, interviews were arranged. All interviews were conducted virtually. There were no follow-up interviews.

In this basic qualitative study, I collected data through face-to-face interviews with experienced African American male principals serving in urban schools. The semistructured interviews took place via videoconferencing, at participant convenience. I served as the primary researcher and collected all necessary data from interviews. The focus of each interview was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills.

Each participant was informed of the right to end the interview at any time. A simple verbal statement to me or to the individuals supervising this study was all that was needed. I used two Olympus digital recording devices to collect data. Interviews lasted no longer than 45 minutes. Each interview was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document.

After the recorded interviews were transcribed, participants were offered the opportunity to review all preliminary transcripts and asked about the accuracy of what was written. Changes were made to the transcripts where needed. At the completion of

the study, all participants were sent the results for their review. This process is known as member checking. After the member checking was concluded, all participants were thanked for their participation and provided a $25.00 gift card. The gift card was collected by postal mail or electronically, according to the choice of the participant.

Data Analysis Plan

To analyze the data, the transcripts were reviewed line by line to verify their accuracy. The coding process then began. Each code was transferred into a spreadsheet using each participant's assigned number. The data was categorized and placed into segments to create meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The analysis plan was based on the guide provided by Creswell and Guetterman (2019) to organize the data and develop themes. The following steps were included during the analysis: (a) explore the data, (b) determine commonalities using codes, (c) establish themes by analyzing the identified code, (d) represent the results of the study in narrative forms, (e) interpret the meaning of the findings, and (f) establish trustworthiness.

Identifying codes from transcribed audio recordings gave meaning to the data and provided opportunities to compare different segments of codes to determine similarities and/or differences. These codes were analyzed for common words and phrases used to determine the major themes and categories. Creating larger conceptual categories to organize codes assisted in developing themes based on the relationship between the categories. The codes were used to connect the data to the findings. The QDA tool was not used for developing patterns or coding the data. These tasks were performed by me. Becoming familiar with data gathering and analysis throughout this process helped to

eliminate any discrepant cases. However, no discrepant cases were identified to be interpreted.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The first step in establishing trustworthiness is to ensure that readers understand the study problem (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this basic qualitative study, trustworthiness was established by using interviews as the data collection method. Credibility and transferability were ensured when the participants had the necessary knowledge and associations to discuss the research topic and to discuss their insights and perspectives (Birt et al., 2016). There was complete transparency in the data collection process to ensure the quality of the study findings.

Credibility

The credibility of the research was established by reviewing audio recordings of interviews to examine participant reactions to the interview questions and protocol. Notes from interviews and member checking were used to sustain credibility. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), credibility of results is gained in qualitative study through the perspective of credible research participants. The goal of qualitative analysis is to present substantive, significant findings (Patton, 2015). Data were triangulated by using audio recordings of the interviews, member checking, and researcher notes that provided additional credibility.

To ensure information gathered was accurate, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts and provide input and feedback (Patton, 2015). This process occurred before coding began. I sent the preliminary results to all participants and

asked of the accuracy of what was written. Changes were made to the transcripts where needed. At the completion of the study, participants were sent the results and asked for their feedback. This process is called member checking and occurred before the publication of the study.

Transferability

Transferability is achieved by providing adequate, copious descriptions of the research process to give readers a proper understanding of the study (Shenton, 2004). In this way, it is possible for readers to compare what is revealed in their situations to the research report. With transferability, future researchers will be able to use the findings of this study to compare the perceptions described with the perceptions of other African American principals. Transferability was ensured by means of thick descriptions so that readers could gain meaningful insights into the experiences and themes described. The detailed framework of the research design provided support for similar research considerations in the future.

Dependability

Dependability means that a qualitative study remains consistent and secure over time (Miles et al., 2014). Dependability is necessary for future researchers to replicate the research. A detailed research plan enabled me to verify what I did during the research, to establish credibility, dependability, and replicability. Dependability was assured through an audit trail consisting of a record of all data collection and research decisions. To document the use of appropriate and sequenced methods to answer research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), steps from the beginning of the research to the results and

findings were maintained in a journal. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for results and findings. A journal was used to document and maintain consistency with the data analysis to present the findings clearly and concisely, so that the findings could be replicated. Dependability was also established through member checking and peer-reviewed feedback from the dissertation committee (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Confirmability

Confirmability means that personal biases and prejudices are minimized as researchers explore and interpret the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Microsoft Word transcription software, but not QDA software, was used to transcribe and code the data precisely to ensure an accurate, unbiased thematic analysis of the research. Interview notes and memos were kept in a reflective journal.

Confirmability was achieved through a process of structured reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to how the researcher is affected by the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With reflexivity, researchers generate data by examining their own conceptual lens and asking questions of themselves (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Reflective journaling strategies were included within the research.

Ethical Procedures

Approval to conduct the study was requested from the IRB of Walden University. Once the Walden University IRB had granted permission to conduct the study, invitations were forwarded to potential participants. The risks of harm to participants in this study were limited. Each participant received information via email, explaining that participants

could terminate their participation in the study at any time without consequence. The information included a written statement of confidentiality. Once the participant consented to participation, a return email was provided to acknowledge consent received. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a numeric code. After the member checking process concluded, all participants were thanked for their participation and provided a $25.00 gift card. The gift card was collected by postal mail or electronically, according to the choice of the participant. When the study results were published, each participant was identified only by a numeric code.

I worked in the same type of district as the participants did. Therefore, I may have had previous professional interactions with potential participants through networking meetings, state-wide meetings, and/or national conferences. The integrity of the research was maintained by having interactions with study participants only in professional settings. When I gathered data, I bracketed my own reactions to maintain neutrality and not allow personal bias to interfere. To ensure that I was not influenced by being an equal colleague of research participants, I worked to be aware and appropriately handle any bias I may have had because of any previous professional relationships with participants.

All research items, including recordings, journal entries, personal notes, and transcripts, are saved electronically and properly secured in a locked file cabinet in my home office. Five years after the publication of the study, data will be physically destroyed and electronically erased, as applicable.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement. The study was conducted with principals working in urban school districts. Nine African American male principals with at least 5 years of experience were interviewed. All participants were currently serving as principals in urban school districts. Participants were asked about current support they received in instructional leadership, the challenges they experienced for which they needed support, and ways they believed instructional leadership support could be strengthened. Data were gathered using one-on-one interviews conducted virtually. The interviews provided an opportunity for experienced African American male principals to share their personal perceptions in confidence and to describe their lived experiences regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills.

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument for the study. To present the interview questions, an interview protocol was used (see Appendix A). Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify themes and patterns that emerged. Audio recorded interviews, reflective notes, and transcriptions related to the study purpose served as instrumentation for the research. Two handheld Olympus audio recording devices were used to ensure full recording of the interviews.

Resources for finding participants who met the sampling criteria included the LinkedIn and Facebook social media sites and members of the National Association of

Secondary School Principals (NASSP). After the Walden University IRB granted

permission to conduct the study, participants were recruited. Participants must have had a

minimum of 5 years of experience as a principal within an urban school setting.

A letter of invitation (see Appendix B) was sent to potential participants identified

as meeting the participant criteria. The invitation included an explanation of the purpose

of the study.

The following steps were included during the analysis: (a) explore the data, (b)

determine commonalities using codes, (c) establish themes by analyzing the identified

code, (d) represent the results of the study in narrative forms, (e) interpret the meaning of

the findings, and (f) establish trustworthiness. Creating larger conceptual categories to

organize codes assisted in developing themes based on the relationship between the

categories. The trustworthiness of the study was assured in terms of credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Ethical procedures included gaining informed consent from all participants and

ensuring their privacy and confidentiality during the research. The risks of harm to

participants in this study were minimal and were limited to any possible psychological

stress from the interview process. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was

assigned a numeric code. When the study results were reported, each participant was

identified only by the numeric code, and the study results were shared with participants in

a verbal presentation scheduled at their convenience. All research items were properly

secured and electronically stored in a locked area in my home office. Five years after the

publication of the study, data will be physically destroyed and electronically erased.

Chapter 3 presented the research method, design, and rationale used for this study. The research questions for the study were presented, and the choice of a basic qualitative study was explained. In the next section, the role of the researcher was discussed, including biases and ethical issues involved in this study. The methodology was explained, including the population and sample, participant selection, and data collection and analysis plan. Issues of trustworthiness were discussed, including credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and the ethical procedures to be used. The chapter concluded with a summary and transition to Chapter 4, where findings of the study were presented, evaluated, and interpreted.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the support they receive for improving their instructional leadership skills?

RQ2: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the challenges they experience with gaining instructional leadership support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills?

RQ3: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe ways to improve the instructional leadership support they need for their leadership?

Chapter 4 includes the setting, demographics, procedures for data collection, the data analysis process, the components involved in establishing trustworthiness of the findings in this research study, and the study's results. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Setting

In this qualitative study, interviews were conducted with qualifying participants employed by any urban school district in the United States. Each urban school principal was invited to participate in a one-on-one semistructured interview conducted virtually.

The study represented six urban school districts in three different states from the Midwest, East, and Southeastern regions of the United States. All principals who participated in the study worked at schools where most students were minorities.

Participant selection for this study occurred in June 2022, when the school year ended. Therefore, the principals' workload was beginning to lessen, and their availability and ability to participate in the research study was increased. Additionally, the virtual interview setting allowed for more flexibility in scheduling, conducting the interviews, and having the principals as full participants without distractions. Finally, the participants were open and honest with their responses and appeared comfortable and connected with me during the interviews.

Demographics

Nine urban school principals consented to participate in the study. All participants met the established criteria of working in an urban school district with at least 5 years of experience as a principal. All participants were asked to detail their current position and years of experience working as principals in an urban school district. Participants also indicated their level of education obtained. All participants were male and African American. The participants included six high school principals, two K-8 principals, and one principal from a school for Grades 6-12. There were two principals in their first year at their schools, although one principal was returning to the school district. One principal was in his third year at the school, and the six remaining principals had been at their schools for at least 5 years. Eight of the nine principals had advanced degrees, and five

held a doctorate. The years of experience of the participants ranged from 8 to 30 years.

Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the participants.

Table 1

Demographic Distribution of Participants (N = 9)

Participant	Highest Degree Completed	U.S. Region	Years at Current School	Years in Urban Schools
1	Master's	Midwest	9	25
2	Bachelor's	South	5	10
3	Doctorate	Midwest	9	20
4	Master's	East	3	27
5	Doctorate	East	5	15
6	Doctorate	East	7	30
7	Master's	Midwest	1	8
8	Doctorate	East	8	17
9	Doctorate	Midwest	1	15

Data Collection

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement. Interview data were collected to address three research questions. Resources for recruiting participants who met the sampling criteria included LinkedIn and Facebook social media sites and contacts with colleagues known from professional interactions. Nine urban school principals from six different school districts, across three regions of the country, consented to be interviewed. An interview protocol (see Appendix A)

included nine open-ended questions during each principal interview. The interviews were semistructured and conducted virtually. Additional clarifying and probing questions were asked that allowed participants to share more detail about their lived experiences.

After the IRB of Walden University approved the request to conduct the research, a letter of invitation was sent to individuals identified as potential participants (see Appendix B). Interviews were conducted during June and July 2022, starting the initial weeks after the last day of the school year. At that time, principals' workloads were lessened because the school year had ended. The lessened workload provided more flexibility to schedule and conduct the interviews during the day. Each interview was conducted virtually in a home office using computer microphone and speakers and was recorded with two Olympus audio recording devices. Each of the nine participants provided an electronic consent prior to participation stating that the interview would be recorded. The recorded virtual interviews were transcribed verbatim and added to the research data collection.

The interview protocol was used to gain the principals' perceptions of the supports needed to improve their instructional leadership skills. The interviews varied in length, but none lasted more than 45 minutes. The interview questions were all asked in the same order except for one participant, whose initial answers segued into questions scheduled to be asked later in the protocol. Probing questions were asked of each participant to gain more clarity, without influencing the content of the responses. On a few occasions, participants said, "I hope that answers the question" or "I hope this

answers it." In response, I simply emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers and that they were encouraged to speak as candidly and honestly as possible.

Each interview was recorded using two hand-held Olympus audio recording devices. I placed the recording devices in the immediate area on the table in my home office, in front of the computer monitor and speakers. Recording was stopped on both Olympus audio recording devices after the completion of each interview, and I turned the recorders off after completing field notes. There were nine separate voice recordings captured during the interview phase on both Olympus audio recording devices and stored on each device in separate folders. Participants were reminded at the beginning of the interview that the interview was being recorded. After completing the interviews, each interview was transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. While reading printed copies of the interview transcripts, the participants' responses were manually coded.

Data Analysis

Data were collected professionally and unbiasedly, along with applying a data analysis plan that was meticulously executed. The initial steps of the data analysis process were based on the coding concepts described by Saldana (2011). The descriptive coding strategy was used for the first round of coding. Going line by line through the transcripts, words were circled that resonated or were repeated several times by the participants. Codes were then written in the margins to give meaning to the words and phrases used by the participants. During the second coding round, the process of categorical organization was used to emphasize the emerging themes. Data analysis was

performed, and I entered the data into a Microsoft Excel workbook. The following steps describe the basic approach to the analysis.

- In Step 1, I read each interview line by line for words and phrases related to the principles outlined in Saldana (2011). Words and phrases were assigned initial codes such as "supervisor relationship" and "cookie-cutter."

- In Step 2, I reread the interview transcripts, searching for any consistencies in the data related to the codes, to categorize the codes within each research question.

- In Step 3, I grouped similar codes with overlapping meaning and assigned categories to represent each code.

- In Step 4, I checked to see what three categories were most frequently expressed for each interview protocol question associated with the three research questions. Categories such as "having a favorable connection" and "knowing how the system works" were developed.

- In Step 5, I charted the most frequently expressed categories from each interview protocol question to determine the categories that were expressed the most often.

- In Step 6, I created five major themes from the categories most frequently expressed, coinciding with the three research questions. Examples of themes that emerged from the categories included "individualized support and professional development" and "professional collaboration."

- Throughout the coding process, I wrote my thoughts in a journal, as I noted initial anxieties in analyzing the data. Receiving positive feedback from my committee, and journaling my thoughts assisted in working through the challenges. This process served as a way to address any bias I may have had while analyzing the data.

For each research question, I moved from codes to categories and then to themes, to create meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Table 2 shows the relationships for each research question. Codes were then organized into a Microsoft Excel document.

Table 2

Codes and Categories Organized Into Themes

RQ	Code	Category	Tentative Theme
RQ1. How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the support they receive for improving their instructional leadership skills?			
	Code 1. No Cookie-Cutter	What I want for me	Theme 1. Individualized support and professional development *Sub-Theme 1. Differentiated support for career stage* *Sub-Theme2. Assessment and concrete feedback* *Sub-Theme3. Professional development with other African American urban principals*
	Code 2. Supervisor Relationship	Getting direct assistance	Theme 2. Coaching and mentorship *Sub-Theme1. Coaching not connected to evaluation process* *Sub-Theme2. Consistency and frequency of support* *Sub-Theme3. Mentorship and Mentoring*
	Code 3. Meet my Neighbor	Network meetings	Theme 3. Professional collaboration *Sub-Theme1. Small group meetings with peers who know the school environment* *Sub-Theme2. Trust and respect*
RQ2. How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the challenges they experience with gaining instructional leadership support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills?			
	Code 1. District systems	Knowing how the system works	Theme 4. Navigating district systems and processes
	Code 2. Know timelines	Teacher evaluations	Theme 4. Navigate district systems and processes

		Sub-Theme1. Understanding the structure of the district support system
Code 3. Waiting game	Knowing how the system works	Theme 4. Navigating district systems and processes *Sub-Theme1. Navigating the system bureaucracies* *Sub-Theme2. Managing everyday work of the school and community*

RQ3. How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe ways to improve the instructional leadership support they need for their leadership?

Code 1. Perceptions/Expectations	What other people believe	Theme 5. Specific issues in the urban school experience *Sub-Theme1. Perceptions and expectations of African American male principals in their instructional leadership role*
Code 2. Accountability Factors	Urban school issues/experience	Theme 5. Specific issues in the urban school experience *Sub-Theme1. Time and opportunities to focus and engage with instructional leadership development practices*
Code 3. Student Preparedness	Urban school issues/experience	Theme 5. Specific issues in the urban school experience Sub-Theme1. Cultural differences in the school community

Note. RQ = research questions.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research must be evaluated. Trustworthiness refers to research's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To establish trustworthiness in this basic qualitative study during the process of data collection, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure no data were lost. There were no technical issues experienced during the recorded interviews. The recordings were clear, which made the transcription process easier. I found that placing the audio recording devices in separate areas around the computer provided the best coverage of sound possible to eliminate unidentifiable comments from participants.

Credibility

The credibility of results is established in qualitative study through the perspective of credible research participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants in this study were experienced educators, working as administrators in their school districts, and conscious of instructional leadership. These credible research participants provided authentic perspectives of the support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills and student academic achievement. To ensure the information gathered was accurate, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interviews and provide input and feedback before the coding process began.

The data were triangulated by using the audio recordings of the interviews, member checking, researcher field notes, and journal entries to provide additional credibility. After conducting each interview, I transcribed the audio recorded interviews

and emailed each participant the transcript of their own interview. In this way, participants could verify the transcripts for accuracy and were given the opportunity to provide feedback on any necessary changes.

This validation process ensured I had correctly portrayed the participants' ideas, details, and experiences (see Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016) and strengthened the study's credibility. No participant requested a change to the interview transcript; therefore, no data were changed. However, it was interesting to note that some expressed hope that their responses were beneficial to the research and that they were very interested in hearing of the study findings. At the completion of the study, participants were sent results and were asked for their feedback. This method, known as member checking, decreased the incidence of incorrect data or incorrect interpretation of the data, so the findings were authentic while establishing credibility through the participants' experiences and perceptions (see Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Transferability

Transferability is the researcher's ability to apply the findings of a study to a larger population (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Transferability is achieved by providing adequate, copious descriptions of the research process to give readers a proper understanding of the study (Shenton, 2004). This study's transferability allowed readers to compare the research report to what was revealed in their own situations. The potential for transferability in the current study was increased through thick and rich descriptions that included participant quotes when applicable.

The results were reported using hefty descriptions, clear details of the interviews, and specific perspectives of the study participants. Consequently, the perspectives from the study participants reflected their personal experiences and practices, which may limit transferability to others in different types of school districts and schools. The objective to present a detailed framework of the research design to provide support and assist the transferability of this study to similar research settings in the future was met.

Dependability

Dependability means that a qualitative study remains consistent and secure over time (Miles et al., 2014). Dependability was necessary for future researchers to replicate this research. All research steps were maintained in a journal (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A detailed research plan, or audit trail, that verified what was done during the research was kept, establishing credibility, dependability, and replicability. To ensure dependability, the journal used for procedural notes and field notes taken provided an awareness of potential bias throughout the study.

In documenting the use of appropriate and sequenced methods to answer research questions, consistency with the data analysis process was maintained by meticulously reviewing each interview transcript to code each transcript effectively. The journal used for the study described the research steps from the beginning of the research to the results and findings. The journaling process included my reflections on the study, the study progression, and the data analysis process, including initial thoughts about the data along with the conclusions. Dependability was also established through member checking and peer-reviewed feedback from the dissertation committee (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Confirmability

Confirmability means that the personal biases and prejudices of the researcher are minimized as researchers explore and interpret the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Microsoft Word software was used to transcribe and code the data precisely to ensure an accurate, unbiased thematic analysis of the research. Interview notes and memos were recorded immediately after each interview as field notes, and a reflective journal was kept throughout the study to support my ability to be neutral. The findings represented the participants' thoughts and opinions. Their responses were transcribed verbatim and quoted verbatim when the results from the research were reported. When coding the transcripts from the interviews, I ensured all themes came from the participants' responses instead of my thoughts or ideas. Any preconceived notions about the study outcomes were bracketed and minimized by continually monitoring any personal opinions through the process of reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to how the researcher is affected by the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process of reflexivity in writing down thoughts assisted in examining judgments made during data analysis so that any explicit or implicit assumptions did not influence research decisions made. Additionally, to ensure the study's trustworthiness, the reflective journal was kept throughout the research process to safeguard against potential bias.

Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement.

Three research questions were addressed through individual semistructured interviews with nine principals, representing six different urban school districts in three states from the Midwest, East, and Southeast United States. Five themes emerged for these research questions. The following is a restatement of the research questions, and the themes that emerged for each research question.

Research Question 1

How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the support they receive for improving their instructional leadership skills?

Three themes emerged for this research question: (a) Individualized support and professional development, (b) Coaching and mentorship, and (c) professional collaboration. The following is a discussion of each of these themes.

Theme 1: Individualized Support and Professional Development

Differentiated Support for Career Stage. One word that was repeated often during the study was "cookie-cutter." Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9 all expressed the view that they desired individualized support that was specific to meeting their needs and that were helping them to grow as instructional leaders. Participants 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 all expressed the view that they wanted support that was differentiated and specific to where they were in their careers. Participants 1, 4, 5, and 6 all expressed the view that their experience with district-led professional development was a waste of time. Participant 2 received little support to improve his instructional leadership skills, as he had difficulty framing the support he was receiving from the district. To access meaningful professional

development, Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, and 9 all reported taking the initiative to seek outside

professional development on their own by attending national conferences and workshops.

Participant 9 indicated that "when you go to conferences, you get excited and you're

ready to initiate what it is that you saw."

Assessment and Concrete Feedback. Participants 3, 7, and 8 all consistently

noted that they wanted to be provided concrete examples to show where they were and

what they needed to improve. Participant 5 desired surveys to determine specific needs

for professional development as a way to eliminate professional development experiences

that failed to improve their instructional leadership. Participant 6 also stressed the use of

surveys as a tool to determine principals' individual needs and how to provide them with

tangible feedback for improvement. Participant 3 and most other principals indicated that

they generally meet with their principal supervisor at the beginning, middle, and end of

the school year. Principals' testimony indicated that minimal feedback is provided to

them throughout the year and the feedback is usually non-specific to what they need to

improve their instructional leadership skills. To gain support with concrete examples,

Participant 4 stated that utilizing the state standards to determine his strengths and

weaknesses is how he can be "provided that feedback, provided examples and concrete

things" as an effective way to support him.

Professional Development With Other African American Urban Principals.

Additionally, Participants 1 and 3 sought out other Black male principals for more

specific support with morale and with navigating through their instructional leadership

development. Participant 1 stated, "The ones (African American males) that actually

made it and became principals, we have a common bond." He also noted that getting with

other African American males is vital because of the limited amount of African American

male principals. Interestingly, Participant 1 further noted his desire to become a principal,

and his desire to seek out other African American male principals for professional

development, arose from the challenging times he shared with other African American

boys during his K-12 experience. There was a sense of duty he had for his own

development, and the successful development of other African American male principals.

Participant 3's initial reach for professional development was to other African American

male principals. He stated, "my initial reach was for African American males because I

felt that they could relate more to what I was going through."

Theme 2: Coaching and Mentorship

Coaching not Connected to Evaluation Process. The most frequently

mentioned response from participants was either the need to have a coach or the positive

experience of having one. Having a leadership coach not connected to the evaluation

process, or considered outside of the district, was most desired by Participants 1, 2, 3, 5,

7, and 9. Participant 1 hired for himself a leadership coach from an outside agency to

provide the coaching he needed. He noted that "she comes in and critiques me on how

I'm interacting with teachers." Principals who did not have coaches relied heavily on

principal supervisors for coaching. It is easily understood from this research that

providing principals a leadership coach if they lack one, and creating instructional

support specific to address principals' needs, are ways to support their leadership

development. Participant 2 specifically indicated, "I especially need coaching support to

help with coaching techniques and coaching leadership skills." Having a coach as
someone to work with as a "think partner" provided principals with the necessary
assistance and support to develop their instructional leadership skills. Receiving one-on-
one sessions with a coach also provided principals the opportunity to be honest and
vulnerable in their conversations. Participant 4 indicated that when he was able to see the
humility and vulnerability in someone working with him, "you kind of let your guard
down…and can be vulnerable with him just as he was vulnerable with you." Participant 7
indicated that he needed to "actually have a person to be an extra layer of support" who
was "really discussing what you're doing daily."

  Consistency and Frequency of Support. Additionally, findings showed that
how, and how often, the principal supervisor provided support to the principals was key
to how principals felt supported by their supervisor. Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9 all
expressed that they met with their principal supervisor in network meetings once a
month, but meeting one-on-one was limited to three visits during the school year.
Participants indicated that the monthly meetings with colleagues were highly favored and
supported their development. The participants who met monthly with their principal's
supervisor and colleagues did express needing more time with their supervisors, but more
time with peers for additional support was also desired. Participants 1, 3, 4, 7, and 8 all
expressed the view that challenges included infrequent opportunities to work with their
principal supervisor and a lack of consistent feedback. The more positively the
participants spoke of their relationship with their principal supervisor, the more they
spoke of how consistently they were supported. Participant 9 indicated having a lot of

face to face time with his supervisor and stated, "our regional superintendent is top quality in being supportive, coming to your building, providing you with ideas and asking for yours." Participants 2, 4, and 7 did not express having monthly meetings with their supervisors or colleagues. Although participant 4 was confident in his skillset, and knew where to seek support if needed, participants 2 and 7 struggled with gaining any consistency or frequency in their support.

Mentorship and Mentoring. The results of the study also revealed that mentorship was a support principals valued in improving their instructional leadership skills. Participant 2 indicated that having a mentor would help to improve his leadership skills and techniques. Participant 3's belief in mentorship was so strong that he suggested that every novice principal have a mentor and that veteran principals should be made to serve as mentors. Having a mentor would provide principals with someone who could give them the "specific feedback and concrete things to be created to show where I am and where I need to grow," as noted by Participant 4. More seasoned participants, including Participants 1, 3, 4, and 9, all expressed the view that serving as mentors to other principals and serving in district-wide leadership positions were ways to keep themselves relevant in their instructional leadership development. Participant 4 indicated that he had spent more time serving as a mentor than seeking support for himself. Participant 3 said, "One reason I became a mentor is to provide my own support system because I had to find other colleagues to assist me when the district wasn't providing those supports."

Theme 3: Professional Collaboration

Small Group Meetings with Peers who Know the School Environment.

During the study, the most consistently mentioned support received by Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9 for improving their instructional leadership skills was the monthly cluster/network meetings held under the direction of the principal's supervisor. These network meetings provided a community of people that often included the principal supervisor, along with a team of network administrators from the central office. Participant 6 found these community learning network meetings as opportunities to sit down as a group and have conversations with people who could offer a different lens when evaluating instruction. These monthly meetings provided small groups to collaborate with peers and become thought partners through the process of growing as instructional leaders. These small groups provided an opportunity to be in a cluster/network of peers who knew the school environment. Thus, the people working in the school were able to provide tailored support for instructional improvement. When discussing his preferred way of support, Participant 3 stated, "Collaborating with peers to discuss thoughts…assist me with developing my practice…while providing me the opportunity to do things on my own."

Trust and Respect. Principals admired and respected their colleagues and valued the opportunity to learn from each other. It appeared that another important element of the value of the monthly network meetings was that these principals trusted the input from colleagues. No participant specifically used the word "trust," but trust was present based on the enthusiasm they each had when discussing the monthly cluster/network

meetings. Participant 6 noted the "synergy" that was felt during those opportunities to meet. To emphasize the need and appreciation he had for cluster/network support during the monthly meetings, Participant 9 said, "Oftentimes we (Black males) get into these positions and don't have that network." Having a network of school leaders with whom they could meet regularly to bounce off ideas and thoughts was viewed as the best opportunity they had to grow professionally. Participant 9 also emphasized that having conversations with colleagues allowed him to "take the best from the best and see how it works with us." Participant 4 did not mention having a monthly cluster/network meeting. However, he felt supported in his current position.

Research Question 2

How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the challenges they experience with gaining instructional leadership support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills?

One theme emerged for this research question: Navigate district systems and processes. The following is a discussion of this theme.

Theme 4: Navigate District Systems and Processes

Understanding the Structure of the District Support System. The challenges experienced by the participants in gaining instructional leadership support were understanding the structure of the district support system, navigating the system bureaucracies, and managing the everyday work of the school and community. How the organizational structure of a district was developed and implemented affected the development of the instructional leadership skill of the principal. The participants whose

school districts did not have a network system of support reported experiencing fewer opportunities to engage in instructional leadership development practices and not receiving adequate support from the district. Participant 2 was not in a district with any leadership support structures. When asked who provided him leadership support, he was not clear on who provided support and had difficulty expressing how he was being supported to improve his instructional leadership skills. When speaking of his experience with meeting the district's instructional evaluation timelines and finding people to assist, Participant 9 spoke of his experience with the person at the district level who was responsible for assisting principals to meet the timelines. In his first year, after returning to the district, he was able to meet timeline requirements via email communications from district officials in place to assist.

Navigating the System Bureaucracies. Participants mentioned challenges in areas involving the navigation of system bureaucracies. These areas include obtaining financial approvals, mastering the teacher evaluation tool, and having the time to meet deadlines/timelines. Being supported financially by the district to attend professional growth opportunities outside the school district was a challenge for Participant 5, who was unable to attend a national conference because he was at a smaller school, which meant he had a smaller budget. For others, if funds were available, attending professional growth opportunities outside the school district was often determined by the school's size and the school district's funding approval process. Principals talked about the teacher evaluation systems used to conduct formal teacher evaluations. Participants did not consistently say that they had direct assistance on how to use the teacher evaluation

systems. However, when noting his experience, Participant 5 stated, "Utilizing the rubric with fidelity and having those pieces in place helped me a lot." Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9 all expressed the view that their instructional leadership development depended on how well versed they were in using the district's teacher evaluation system. The priority of meeting the mandated timelines appeared to be the most important aspect of the teacher evaluation process.

Managing Everyday Work of the School and Community. A challenge for African American male principals in urban schools to improve their instructional leadership skills is the responsibility of managing the everyday work of the school and community. Participant 8 expressed that there is a different demand and a need when African American male principals are placed in schools that need turn-around. Participant 9 said, "it's almost like a turnover or turncoat, giving you the keys." Thus, turn-around work begins almost immediately and will be needed to improve instructionally, addressing the facilities, and building community relationships with all stakeholders. Participant 8 further noted that "access for support is there. But due to the seat that I sit in, it's hard for me to access that, especially in an urban environment, where it's more than just ABCs or one two threes." Each day, principals have to secure substitute teachers, address facility issues, serve at lunch duty, maintain a presence in hallways, and address issues within the school and community that impact the school's culture and climate.

Research Question 3

How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe ways to improve the instructional leadership support they need for their leadership?

One theme emerged for this research question: Specific issues in the urban school experience. The following is a discussion of this theme.

Theme 5: Specific Issues in the Urban School Experience

Time and Opportunities to Focus and Engage With Instructional Leadership Development Practices. Participants 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 all expressed their views about needing more time and opportunities to focus and engage with instructional leadership development practices. When talking about the ability to conduct teacher evaluations, Participant 4 said, "Observing teachers on a timeline is a challenge because you do have so many other responsibilities." Participant 8 indicated a reason behind his lack of time and opportunity to focus and engage with instructional leadership development practices was dealing with the effects of having students in the building that are disengaged with instruction. He expressed the view that district officials need to support principals in removing and/or not placing students in the school that are disengaged so that he would then have more time to develop his instructional leadership practices.

Cultural Differences in the School Community. For example, Participant 7 indicated rotating chief executive officers and a state takeover of the school district were reasons for the inability to improve one's instructional leadership development. Participants 3, 6, 8, and 9 all expressed the view that they were placed in school settings

that made culture and climate their primary job, rather than instructional leadership development. Participants 6, 7, and 8 all expressed the view that the lack of awareness of the cultural differences that existed within their school communities was a challenge in developing instructional leadership skills. Principals were provided opportunities to support teachers with grade-level strategies and outcomes, yet a vast majority of their students were not performing at grade level. Participant 7 indicated that the district's equity team, created to address the equity imbalance, was "missing the mark because people don't understand the work." Participant 6 believed the school district's accountability measures for principals did not recognize the grade-level and testing deficiencies of the student population, thereby contributing to the misinterpretation that high-quality instruction was not being delivered.

Perceptions and Expectations of African American Male Principals in Their Instructional Leadership Role. Their experiences revealed an implicit bias that these principals' best attribute was establishing and maintaining the school culture and climate. Therefore, support for instructional leadership became lax throughout the school year. Participant 8 stated, "I believe we live a different reality from our counterparts and that there's an implicit bias towards our capacity." He viewed the district as saying, "We're not asking you to build your instructional capacity…we're asking you to maintain culture and climate within your building." Participants 1, 6, 7, and 8 expressed the view that their ability to demonstrate how well they were provided instructional leadership was continually compromised and needed to be addressed. Changes in perceptions of district leadership, and specifically communicating the expectations of African American male

principals in their instructional leadership role, would need to happen before instructional support specific to address principals' needs is created to support their leadership development.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement. Chapter 4 included the setting, demographics, procedures for data collection, data analysis process, components involved in establishing the trustworthiness of the findings in this research study, and the results of the study. Interviews were conducted with qualifying participants employed by any urban school district in the United States. Each urban school principal was invited to participate in a one-on-one semistructured interview conducted virtually. Six different urban school districts in three different states from the Midwest, East, and Southeast United States were represented in the study. All principals who participated in the study worked at schools where most of the students were members of minority groups.

Nine urban school principals consented to participate in the study. All participants were male and African American. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to gain the principals' perceptions of the support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills.

After the completion of the interviews, each interview was transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. While reading printed copies of the interview

transcripts, the participants' responses were manually coded, codes were categorized to create meaning, and I then organized the codes into a Microsoft Excel document. The descriptive coding strategy was used for the first round of coding. In Step 1, each interview transcript was read line by line. Words and phrases were assigned initial codes such as "supervisor relationship" and "cookie-cutter." In Step 2, the interview transcripts were reread, searching for any consistencies in the data related to the codes, to categorize the codes within each research question. In Step 3, similar codes with overlapping meanings were grouped and assigned categories to represent each code. In Step 4, I checked to see what three categories were most frequently expressed for each protocol question associated with the three research questions. In Step 5, the most frequently expressed categories from each protocol question were charted to determine the categories that were expressed the most often. In Step 6, five major themes from the categories most frequently expressed were created, coinciding with the three research questions. Examples of themes that emerged from the categories included "Individualized support and professional development" and "Navigate district systems and processes." My thoughts were written in a journal throughout the coding process, as initial anxieties were noted about analyzing the data. Receiving positive feedback from my committee and journaling my thoughts assisted in working through the challenges. The trustworthiness of the study was established in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

How experienced African American male principals perceived the support they received in improving their instructional leadership skills was not understood. Three

research questions were addressed. Five themes emerged: (a) Individualized support and professional development, (b) coaching and mentorship, (c) professional collaboration, (d) navigate district systems and processes, and (e) specific issues in the urban school experience. The results of this study revealed specific needs of African American male principals to improve their instructional leadership skills. These findings represent an original contribution to the literature.

To reinforce the literature review, culturally relevant concepts and theories of Black males were explored in this research, as suggested by Brooms (2019). This study also extended the knowledge of the phenomenon of African American male principals placed in high-needs schools, as suggested by Bass and Alston (2018), by examining their perceptions and revealing their needs for improving their instructional leadership skills. Findings of the current study confirm Woulfin and Weiner's (2019) belief in creating specified supports to urban school leaders based on beliefs and practices reflected. Findings also confirm that urban districts will need to take new approaches in the partnership between office staff members and school principals to develop instructional leaders systematically (Thessin, 2021). The study findings confirm that the conditions put in place by district leaders for instructional leadership practices must be examined and changed to optimize principals' instructional practices (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Participants believed that increased engagement and dialogue were helpful (DeMatthews, 2016), along with being provided an environment for them to collaborate and learn from each other (Smith et al., 2020). Additionally, this study reinforced that continual professional and personal development throughout an entire career is how

principals succeed (Duncan, 2013), along with having appropriate supervisor/mentor support (Tingle et al., 2019).

Findings of this study confirmed that a productive partnership between principal supervisors and principals for schools in urban settings should be developed (Thessin, 2019). Additionally, this study confirmed that local systems contributed to conditions that did not support principals (Levin et al., 2020). Finally, this study reinforced the conclusions that African American principals are instructional leaders and systemic connectors by revealing the dualism of bureaucrat-administrator and ethno-humanist roles noted by Henderson (2015). In Chapter 5, the results of the study are discussed, recommendations are made, and conclusions are drawn.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement. A qualitative method was chosen to elicit authentic responses from a group of educators who have usually been overlooked in educational research studies. Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the support they receive for improving their instructional leadership skills?

RQ2: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the challenges they experience with gaining instructional leadership support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills?

RQ3: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe ways to improve the instructional leadership support they need for their leadership?

The problem addressed in this study was that African American male principals are frequently placed in low-achieving schools but are provided limited support beyond programs for new principals. Bass and Alston (2018) indicated that African American male principals are most often placed in high-needs schools with disadvantaged students. Instructional leadership skills affect the teaching and learning process and can contribute to improving student academic achievement. Tingle et al. (2019) found that instructional

leadership influenced principals' effectiveness for turnaround schools. Nine experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts, with at least 5 years of experience as a principal, consented to participate. I conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews to provide meaningful information to answer the research questions.

Key findings indicated that an individualized approach to professional development, direct coaching, and peer collaboration were needed to improve instructional leadership skills for experienced principals. Farver and Holt (2015) found that coaching and evidenced-based professional development built the instructional leadership capacity of school leaders. Therefore, my study confirms the findings that future efforts to support all leaders in all stages of their leadership development should be consistent across the continuum and support instructional leadership capacity through leadership coaching. Additionally, the ability of school districts to assist in addressing the day-to-day challenges experienced in urban school settings would increase the time available to focus on improving instructional leadership skills. Five major themes emerged from this study: (a) Individualized support and professional development, (b) coaching and mentorship, (c) professional collaboration, (d) navigate district systems and processes, and (e) specific issues in the urban school experience.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings showed the principals' perceptions of what was needed to improve their instructional leadership skills to improve student academic achievement. The principals in this study commonly described their experience with district-led

professional development as "cookie-cutter." Consistent with Thessin and Louis (2019), principals need evolving feedback and support for student outcomes to potentially increase. Participant 6 described the "cookie-cutter" experience as the district "making sure you understand what they're asking you to get done in your school rather than provide the instructional leadership." That description confirmed previous research by Duncan (2013) in that principals require different things to learn at different stages throughout their careers, and different areas of professional development are required to sustain personal motivation. All nine participants mentioned needing individualized support, differentiated support, and/or a coach to help improve their instructional leadership skills.

The most commonly expressed desire was to have support in the way participants needed to be supported. Tingle et al. (2019) found that adjusting leadership development should be considered after continually surveying principals and examining the support they needed. It is expected that due to the stress of the job, the turnover rate of principals will continue to grow at a more rapid pace if supports are not examined and adjusted to suit individual principal needs.

Findings of the study also showed that the perceptions and expectations of district leadership, the experience with the principal's supervisor, and the ability to collaborate with peers were key to the development and sustainability of the principals. Through the lens of the transformative learning theory, it was clear that principals needed others in the process of changing within their instructional leadership development. They needed the district to understand and acknowledge the challenging circumstances they experienced

leading urban schools. In previous literature (Baumgartner, 2020), it was found that participants desired a principal supervisor and/or coach who provided tailored support, along with the autonomy to implement any newly suggested strategies. Participants also believed that a coach was important to provide the individualized support necessary for instructional leadership skill development. This finding is consistent with Gray (2018), who introduced a model that provided instructional leaders with specifically chosen mentors and coaches to help strengthen their instructional leadership capacity. Farver and Holt (2015) also noted that coaching was necessary as a strategy to support principals in urban schools. Through the lens of SCCT, my study results showed that principals commonly looked to peers and "think partners" to process their career development continually in an effort to succeed in their careers. Factors that influenced career development were logically connected using the SCCT framework.

The findings of this study uncovered that the most common approach to improving the instructional leadership skills of principals was to have monthly meetings with a cluster/network of colleagues common to each other. I also discovered that taking one's own initiative to seek professional development outside the school district was necessary for professional growth and development. Because urban school leadership requires a wide range of skills and abilities to have positive effects on urban schools and student achievement (Dolph, 2017), principals must seek additional support for development. Conducting this study was needed to increase the engagement and dialogue to help sustain African American males in principal positions (DeMatthews, 2016).

Finally, the findings of this study found that all participants perceived their duties and responsibilities to be challenging and that they needed support. The challenges of the urban school experience play a significant role in the principal's ability to meet the expectation of developing instructional leadership skills and meeting the expectation of providing a safe and orderly school environment. Developing, hiring, and supporting African American male principals would allow this dual role to bring value to African American male principals as instructional leaders (Henderson, 2015). Although challenges were pervasive, participants often showed compassion, understanding, and a commitment to their students' education and to their communities, consistent with the findings of Lomotey (1993). Despite the challenges, their career paths were based on environmental and social factors, along with self-efficacy, interest, and performance (Hansen & Leuty, 2007).

Henderson (2015) noted that African American male principals have been found to be devalued through systemic myths and manipulated perceptions. Conducting this study confirmed Henderson's notion and showed that participants perceived an inherent bias to their instructional leadership capacity on the part of individuals in district leadership and in their schools. Even in instances where instructional gains were being made, such as in the case of Participant 8, rarely were they approached to share instructional leadership capacity with district leadership. Having a principal supervisor who "has a record of nonrenewing Black males" prompted Participant 2 to reveal the discrepancy, in order to gain his reassignment.

Limitations of the Study

This basic qualitative study was conducted with African American male principals with at least 5 years of experience working in urban school districts across three regions of the United States. Limitations must be identified to acknowledge areas of potential weakness in a research study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This study had several important limitations. The sample size was small. Only nine principals participated in the study. The COVID-19 pandemic restricted the availability of potential participants, as only 12 potential participants responded to the recruitment effort. Additionally, the risk of bias during the study was mitigated by remaining open-minded during data analysis and not allowing my role as a principal to influence discovery.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research are based on the strengths and limitations of this study, along with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. All principals participating in this research expressed perceptions of their instructional leadership experience with authenticity, confidence, and a sense of ownership of their workload. However, the limitation of only having nine principals restricted the ability to gain a broader number of perspectives.

Based on the findings of the current study, the first recommendation is to conduct an in-depth investigation designed to identify the types of individualized support and style of coaching needed to improve the instructional leadership skills of African American male principals in urban school districts. The results of the suggested study

would be compared with the results of the current study to establish differences and similarities in findings regarding the improvement of instructional leadership skills.

The next recommendation is to evaluate the effectiveness of individualized progressive development and coaching support. The current study elucidated the biases and preconceived beliefs that African American male principals experience related to instructional leadership capacity and support.

This research study has helped to uncover several other factors that affected the ability to improve instructional leadership skills. Routine violence and conflict inside urban schools and the time taken to address these incidents affect the availability of these principals to improve their instructional leadership skills. The routine assignment of overaged and under-credited students in urban school settings, who may also lack the necessary academic capabilities and desire, affect the principals' opportunity to reveal improved instructional leadership skills. These factors affect the evaluation and sustainability of these principals.

I recommend a quantitative study to evaluate the presence and effectiveness of individualized support, professional development, and leadership coaching provided by urban school districts that looks at how this all impacts student achievement and school culture. The focus of the current study was principals' perceptions. It is important to know how individualized professional development and coaching support affect the improvement in instructional leadership skills along with improving student achievement. With this information, school leaders could make more informed decisions about how

they provide professional development and coaching to African American male principals.

Implications

In this study, the perceptions of experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts were explored regarding the support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills. With the results of the current study, the urban school principals reinforced their perceptions of what was needed to improve their instructional leadership skills to improve student academic achievement. The study implications for social change involve improving the instructional leadership skills of African American male principals as individuals, at the school level, and at the district level. Because a lack of African American leadership has negatively affected African American children, providing appropriate support to these principals could benefit males of color, particularly, in more significant ways than simply improving academic achievement.

Conclusion

The problem addressed in this study was that African American male principals were frequently placed in low-achieving schools but were provided limited support beyond programs for new principals. How experienced African American male principals perceived the support they received in improving their instructional leadership skills was not understood. Therefore, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of experienced African American principals regarding the support they received to improve their instructional leadership skills as a way to improve student academic achievement. I collected data via semistructured interviews with urban school

principals. The analysis of the data showed that the participants desired support that was specific to their individual needs. Participants wanted to have direct coaching from an outside source and consistent opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. Participants also needed to know the systems and processes of their district to be successful in their instructional leadership role. In addition, a majority of principals described the dual roles they encountered with leading urban schools. They believed that one job was to have a strong presence, influence, and system to dictate the culture and climate in challenging school environments. Nevertheless, they were held to the same accountability measures of instructional leadership engagement and academic gains as colleagues at schools with lesser demands. Principals believed this dual role contributed to others' expressed misperceptions and low expectations in regard to their instructional leadership capacity.

Five themes emerged from the study: (a) Individualized support and professional development, (b) coaching and mentorship, (c) professional collaboration, (d) navigate district systems and processes, and (e) specific issues in the urban school experience. Future studies should concentrate on recognizing and identifying the effectiveness of individualized support, professional development, and leadership coaching provided by urban school districts. A closer examination of the effectiveness of individualized support and coaching provided to African American male principals in urban school districts may assist with future determinations for support at the district level.

This study has made an original contribution to the field of education in its investigation of a population of educators that has been under investigated. The results of this study unearthed specific needs of African American male principals to improve their

instructional leadership skills. Learning the perceptions of African American male principals provided a unique, authentic voice in educational research. Through this study, district leaders in urban schools will have the ability to approach the instructional leadership development of African American male principals with a new lens, as a way to improve student academic achievement. Simply stated, specific challenges require specific support for African American male principals. Leaders of urban school districts are encouraged to recognize the findings presented in this study. Participants repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with "cookie-cutter" support for their work. Providing differentiated, unblanketed support to principals across a school district will be necessary to address the unique needs and perceptions of African American male principals working in urban school districts.

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Appendix A: Principal Interview Protocol

INTRODUCTION

1. Review Ground Rules outlined below and ask if there are any questions:

    -My role here today is to serve as the moderator. I will present topics for discussion, ask questions, listen, and help guide the discussion when appropriate.

    -The virtual discussion today will be recorded, along with using two small tape recorders.

    -Your individual response will be kept confidential. No names will be used. The information you provide, however, may be used in research reports, publications, and presentations. The interview will be a one-on-one session with me.

    -There are no "right or wrong" answers to any of the questions. It is important that you are as candid as possible and that you participate as fully as possible.

    -Because today's session is being taped recorded, be sure to speak loudly and clearly.

2. Script:

    - I want to thank you again for taking your time to participate in this interview. My purpose today is to hear about your experiences with instructional leadership. Our conversation today will only last up to one hour.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

RQ1: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the support they receive for improving their instructional leadership skills?

Interview question 1: What supports do you receive to improve your instructional leadership skills?

Interview question 2: How are you supported with improving your instructional leadership skills?

Interview question 3: Describe how you are supported in conducting formal teacher evaluations?

RQ2: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe the challenges they experience with gaining instructional leadership support needed to improve their instructional leadership skills?

Interview question 4: What challenges are experienced in getting support to improve your instructional leadership development?

Interview question 5: What professional development provided to improve your instructional leadership skills have been the least beneficial?

Interview question 6: What other comments do you have related to the continued development of your instructional leadership skills?

RQ3: How do experienced African American male principals working in urban school districts describe ways to improve the instructional leadership support they need for their leadership?

Interview question 7: What do you need to better support your instructional leadership development?

Interview question 8: What does your district need to do to support principals'

instructional leadership development at various stages of their career?

Interview question 9: What supports have been the most beneficial experience

that assisted with improving your instructional leadership skills?

CLOSE

- Are there any other experiences in your instructional leadership capacity that we

  have not already discussed that you feel I should know?

- Do you have any questions?

- Thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix B: Email to Participants

Subject: Perceptions of Experienced African American Male Principals of Supports
Needed to Improve Their Instructional Leadership Skills

Hello,

My name is Vance Benton. I am currently a doctoral student at Walden University. I would like for you to be interviewed as you participate in a research study examining the perception of experienced African American male principals of the supports needed to improve their instructional leadership skills. Extensive literature exists on instructional leadership in research, but limited research exists on the perceptions of experienced African American male principals. That is why this research will be primarily conducted with experienced African American male principals in urban settings. Because experienced African American male principals face the same challenges and obstacles of inadequate resources, and poor student performance, I felt it necessary to learn of their perceptions on instructional leadership. The researcher looks to outline the perceptions and practices these urban, experienced, African American principals deploy to narrow the achievement gap.

I am seeking eight to ten experienced African American male principals, who lead urban schools to share the personal and professional experiences as an educational leader in hopes to improve the instructional leadership skills of African American male principals. Volunteers must be African American, male, a principal in urban school for at least 5 years. You are being asked to share your perceptions during a one-hour interview held at a time and place at your request. I plan to include data gained from your interview into my study. A fictitious name/number is to be provided to protect your identity. Lastly,

there is a $25.00 financial reward as a result of your participation in this study. If you are

willing to participate in this study, please respond to let me know of your interest. I can

also be reached at --------------------.

Thank you,

Vance M. Benton