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Black Female School Administrators and Complexity Management in Low-Performing

Kimberly Boswell
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Kimberly Boswell

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Review Committee

Dr. Lori Salgado, Committee Chairperson,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Mark Gordon, Committee Member,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2024

Abstract

Black Female School Administrators and Complexity Management in Low-Performing

Schools

by

Kimberly Boswell

MA, Walden University, 2021

MSW, University of Texas at Arlington, 2006

BIS, University of Texas at El Paso, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

According to district and state achievement metrics, low-performing public schools must make adequate yearly progress. Deficiencies in the preparation, training, and support of Black female principals who routinely lead low-performing schools can contribute to complexities in these challenging environments. Little is known about what Black female principals believe they need to successfully lead improvement in low-performing schools. The purpose of this study was to give voice to the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools so that educational and political leaders understand what is needed to prepare them to lead amid complexity. Research questions focused on the training and support needs of Black female principals and were crafted to inform policy efforts to enhance preparation programs to support school improvement. Buckley's complex adaptive systems theory was used to support the context of school improvement through an understanding of complexity management. The voices of seven Black female school principals were examined through interviews using a general qualitative approach and the data were analyzed using a thematic analysis. Results included four themes which indicated that lack of sufficient preparation, training, support, and resources impeded the improvement efforts facilitated by Black female principals leading in this context. Participants expressed specific needs related to preparation, training, and support to manage complexities experienced in their roles. The implications for positive social change include informing education officials and policy makers of the need for targeted preparation and comprehensive support of these leaders to increase effectiveness in improving educational outcomes for students and the communities in which they reside.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my children and grandchildren. They have had to be patient and understanding while I worked long hours on this degree. In their own special ways, they have inspired, encouraged, and motivated me along this journey. I hope that through this process, they can see that no matter the obstacle, they can absolutely achieve anything that they desire.

I dedicate this work to my sister. She has stood by and supported me throughout this entire process. This road would have been that much harder without her ongoing support. Also, I dedicate this to my niece who along with my children has entertained the many times I have made conversation and everyday activities into empowerment sessions for personal growth and professional achievement.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my entire family who encouraged me to keep the pace and live up to my highest potential. To my Big Mama whom I affectionately call mom, who always made me feel as if she believed in my dreams and encouraged me to share my gift of writing. Well, I have written at the highest level. She was here at the start of this journey. Today, I feel her spirit in the room as I complete this process. I know she is extra proud.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Education agencies face scrutiny each year while working to improve low-performing schools. Meyers (2019) shared that school districts continue to mull over best practices in setting the foundation for intervening in low-performing schools, leaving some turnaround initiatives widely unsuccessful. Schools in urban areas are usually characterized by high poverty and attended by a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic students and language learners (Meyers, 2019). Research by Schueler et al. (2021) cited that difficulties to improving academic outcomes for students in low-performing schools are related to the income gap between wealthy and poor families. The complexity surrounding low-performing schools can create ongoing tension and frustration, prompting the need for strong leadership. Meyers (2019) shared that the Black and Hispanic students who attend these schools are less likely to be on the same academic level as their White peers attending higher performing schools, signaling a need for more resources, better teaching practices, and a focus on equity across the board.

For Black female principals who overwhelmingly lead these schools, there are few known answers detailing what they believe can change the trajectory of leading improvement in low-performing schools. Williams and Welch (2017) highlighted that current programs focus more on accountability than on how to mitigate daily complex context-specific issues. With accountability measures at the top of every school leader's mind and low-performing schools still a fixture in our communities, preparation programs have seemingly failed to meet the needs of leaders charged with improving outcomes.

According to the National Teacher and Principal Survey facilitated by the National Center for Education Statistics, during the 2015–2016 school year, 7% of the total number of school administrators in the United States were Black women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Most Black female school principals serve in high-poverty schools with challenging circumstances (Jang & Alexander, 2022). To address this phenomenon, this study focused on Black female principals who lead or have led low-performing schools and their understanding of complexity of their role and how to manage it. This study is critical because leaders must embody the unique skill set to lead in the challenging school improvement environment amid rigid and uncompromising expectations.

Black female principals are assigned more often to lead and turn around low-performing schools, sometimes with limited resources and support (Smith, 2022). Smith (2022) shared that due to their intersecting identities and perceived *superwoman complex*, it is assumed that Black female principals can successfully mitigate barriers in schools located in urban areas with predominately Black or brown students. For this reason, it is necessary to hear from Black female principals about what training and support are needed to help them succeed in leading improvement. Black female principals who currently serve or have served in this capacity within the last 3 years should be able to contribute valuable information about their needs in such a crucial leadership role. If they are given the opportunity to share their thoughts on what is needed to cultivate an environment in which students in low-performing schools can thrive, the life trajectory of minority students will be positively impacted.

The conditions shared above, societal issues inherent in low-income communities, and the historical framework of the education system contribute to the complexities that can stall improvement efforts. In Chapter 1, I provide an overall picture of the research, presenting the background of the study and discussing the study's framework, assumptions, limitations, and significance. I conclude this chapter with a summary and preview of Chapter 2.

Background

Coser and Jones (2016) affirmed that low-performing schools need more time to make sufficient gains year after year. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was initiated to close the achievement gap between Black, Hispanic, and White students by providing a framework for learning agencies to ensure equitable practices across educational programming (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). Dixon et al. (2021) shared that since Black female principals lead in these school settings in large numbers, they are the leaders who are expected to make significant progress in closing the gaps in low-performing schools. The ESSA Statute provides guidance for ensuring sufficient preparation initiatives for school leaders to facilitate improvement. Slater (2018) criticized preparation programs stating that they lag behind and focus primarily on the standardization of practices rather than context-specific topics targeting leadership in complex environments.

Low-performing schools are generally located in urban areas with significant community challenges. Parshardis et al. (2018) shared that the context of these schools determines the success, failure, level of student achievement, and overall functioning.

Conditions stemming from inequalities and systemic societal problems hinder school improvement (Hung et al., 2019). Due to these circumstances, schools in these neighborhoods fall behind schools located in more affluent areas (Parshiaridis et al., 2018).

Schools are part of a sizeable and extensive system comprised of many parts. Fidan and Blaci (2017) defined schools as complex adaptive systems (CAS), self-organizing to achieve a stable state without external interference. Those leading improvement in low-performing schools must understand that no individual controls the whole truth and does not have the resources alone to initiate change. External interferences are problematic for low-performing schools as many influences work together or against each other to impact the system.

The functioning of components within or around school systems contributes to the complexity that impacts school improvement. Governments, policies, and teacher unions are all considered components of school systems (Fidan & Blaci, 2017). Dimmock et al. (2021) shared that components such as curriculum and instruction also influence levels of complexity. These components are a small part of the interworking of the system and impact the outcomes of low-performing schools. De Bruyn and Mestry (2020) shared that many Black female principals enter their roles as school leaders in urban schools with some of the same experiences as the students they serve. The findings from this study are needed to provide context for how Black female principals can successfully improve low-performing schools. Culturally, Black women possess resilience from a history of societal inequality (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020). These experiences ingrained in their history

promote an empathetic understanding of the circumstances surrounding the lives of their students. A history of strength while facing unfavorable odds is an example of courage and determination for students and can fuel optimism (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020).

Findings of this study are also needed so lawmakers can support the implementation of principal preparation programs that harness the unique skillset of Black female principals while training them how to manage complexity within the context of a low-performing school successfully.

Problem Statement

Low-performing schools often located in low-income, urban areas are attended primarily by Black and Hispanic students. These schools are characterized by low academic achievement among students who routinely battle extenuating circumstances in and around the school community. Principals who lead these schools contend with many historical, political, social, and economic issues (DeMatthews, 2016). Experiences brought on by social inequality, single-parent households, incarcerated parents, economic challenges, violence, and drug-related issues shed light on the consequences of living in low-income neighborhoods surrounding low-performing schools.

Low-performing schools face significant challenges, which impede efforts to meet accountability measures for school improvement (Cosner & Jones, 2016). In these schools, some of the students raised in low-income communities struggle with low reading levels, learning deficiencies, and language barriers. These factors perpetuate the continuous achievement gap between Black and Hispanic students and their White counterparts. These compounded conditions in and around low-performing schools

present upending challenges for teachers in the classroom and the principals who lead the work.

The ESSA is the federal government's response to society's long-standing educational shortcomings, focusing on providing equitable educational practices for underserved students (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). In contrast to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Law, under ESSA, states are given the power to craft their accountability systems to hold districts and schools accountable for student academic progress (Klein, 2016). The statute states that long-term goal attainment must address the following areas: proficiency in English language arts and mathematics, academic growth for elementary and middle school students, graduation rates for high schools, and gains in English language proficiency. States must develop one additional target to indicate school quality or a measure of student success to promote meaningful differentiation in school performance (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016).

Policymakers wrote the policy to allow states to decide what their schools need to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). ESSA details specific actions that states must take to ensure compliance with the policy and adherence to the tenants of the law. Critics of the policy expressed concern that some states would overlook the unique needs of low-performing schools, thereby continuing the cycle of inequity (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016).

Giving the power to the states to develop and oversee state education policies provided an avenue for states, districts, and schools to collaboratively and cohesively design an educational program that would adequately prepare all students for successful

outcomes (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). To improve student achievement in low-performing schools, ESSA stipulates that states must identify schools in the bottom 5% of performers at least once every 3 years (Klein, 2016). According to the policy, states are required to intervene if schools continue to fall short of accountability goals after updated policies and practices (Klein, 2016)

The problem exists that, despite ESSA's framework for educating all students, low school performance continues to be a widespread concern in many communities. At the end of the 2018–2019 school year, seven states reported that over 50% of their schools were low-performing, and eight other states identified over 25% as low-performing (The Wing Institute, 2019). Data from the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the National Report Card, reflected decreased Reading and Math scores for 4th and 8th-grade students and stagnant scores for students in 12th grade since 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The NAEP also confirmed more significant declines for lower-performing students. Data from this assessment also confirmed that the achievement gap is still evident today, as Black and Hispanic students in urban areas scored 20 points lower than their White counterparts. These data alone are a reminder of the challenges surrounding improving low-performing schools.

Lomotey (2019) confirmed that 13% of female principals were Black women. According to research, Black female principals routinely lead in low-performing schools in urban areas, which add unique challenges to their leadership (Lomotey, 2019). Black female principals likely serve in these challenging environments for two reasons. Some

prefer to work in a school setting with students of the same race. Research supports the idea that due to their intersecting identities and ability to relate and connect with students of color, Black female principals are more comfortable and fulfilled when working with students in these challenging environments. A second reason why Black female principals lead in this school context is also in the research. Weiner et al. (2022) suggested that in 2016, while Black female principals only made up 6% of the total number of individuals serving as school principals in the United States, they were more likely to be placed in under resourced and underperforming schools. This is due to the assumption that Black female principals can successfully influence students of color to take responsibility and act on their academic future (Weiner et al., 2022). While Black female principals may generally possess resilience and adaptability to the challenges of low-performing schools as well as a unique personality and character traits connecting them with the students and their environments, this alone may not be enough to facilitate improvement in low-performing schools. Not enough is known about the experiences of Black female principals and the preparation they believe is needed to lead within the complex environment of a low-performing school. As a result, we must hear from them on what training and preparation they need to lead successfully.

Purpose of the Study

Principals of low-performing schools are expected to accelerate significant growth in failing schools within high-stakes accountability systems. Systemic barriers and inequalities within the educational system have impeded efforts to positively impact school improvement leading to acceptable academic performance. This study explored

and gave voice to the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools so that educational and political leaders could understand what is needed for principal preparation programs amid an education system consumed by complexity, particularly within underserved communities. Findings of this study could be used by school districts, state education officials, and policymakers to impact legislative decisions regarding equity within the school system.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do Black female principals describe the essential components of preparation, training, and support needed to manage complexities in low-performing schools?

RQ2: How can the experiences of Black female principals of low-performing schools inform policies and programs to support them in leading improvement efforts successfully?

Theoretical Framework

Complex adaptive systems theory asserts that complex adaptive systems CAS are self-organizing without central control (Fidan & Balci, 2017). The premise of complex adaptive systems theory is that systems are dynamic and adaptive, not rigid. Fidan and Balci (2017) shared that these systems are deeply rooted in their environments, and the interaction of components affects their development. Using complex adaptive systems theory is a way to see low-performing schools through the lens of a system with many interacting elements that influence and impact improvement.

As evident in school functioning, CAS adapt and evolve with a changing environment. These systems reorganize and adapt to the problems brought on by their surroundings without separation from the governing system. The environment in which a low-performing school exists is comprised of many components, and the school system can be influenced by components existing outside or within the school. For low-performing schools, turnaround initiatives, accountability metrics, and curriculum requirements, among other factors, affect the school system's operation. In Chapter 2, I will provide a more thorough explanation of schools as complex adaptive systems.

Nature of the Study

This generic qualitative study allowed me to gather data from a small sample size of the target population (Bhattacharya, 2017). I used open-ended questioning to interview seven current and former Black female principals to gather their perceptions about the preparation and training needed to manage complexity while leading in a low-performing school. The data collected will aid in understanding the experiences and perceptions of Black female principals leading in this role.

The qualitative method also allows a researcher to understand experiences and develop themes impacting the research (Brachie et al., 2021). Using a generic qualitative approach provided an opportunity to learn how Black female principals perceive leadership in a low-performing school. I gathered insight into the complexities of everyday school functioning by asking focused, open-ended questions during an interview. After recording and transcribing interviews, I reviewed transcripts and highlighted similarities in participant responses and then analyzed the data using manual

coding, Delve coding software, and thematic analysis. I used this information to determine essential preparation, training, and support components needed to manage complexities in low-performing schools.

Definitions

Low-performing public schools: Schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress according to state and district achievement metrics (Cosner & Jones, 2016). Low-performing schools can also be labeled as failing, struggling, and unacceptable.

Complexity: The study of an experience or phenomenon from a collection of interacting components (Rosenhead et al., 2019). It represents a system of components that interact mutually to influence prospective events (Fidan & Balci, 2017).

Accountability: Policies adopted by education systems to use standardized tests to determine student achievement (Huilla, 2019).

Achievement gap: A gap in achievement between White, Black, and Hispanic students (Hung et al., 2020).

Assumptions

To ensure clarity and transparency in the study, I indicated the following five assumptions. One assumption was that the participant responses to the semistructured research questions would yield a deeper analysis of the phenomenon (Gill et al., 2008). Walton et al. (2022) shared the importance of considering the intersecting identities of Black women when preparing for and conducting interviews. Although interview questions were developed from a constructivist worldview perspective, they were crafted specifically with the intended participant in mind. This was intended to help alleviate any

concerns they may have with their contributions to the research being correctly interpreted.

A second assumption was that since Black female principals are already leading low-performing schools in large numbers, they would be able to play a huge role in increasing the success of Black children (Lomotey, 2019). To do this, they need and desire preparation and training to positively impact the lives of minority students in their schools. Third, I assumed that the perspectives of Black female principals who lead low-performing schools are authentic and that these are the experiences that policymakers need to consider when designing programs to prepare and support them in their work. A fourth assumption was that most Black female principals in different parts of the county have the same experiences leading low-performing schools. Al-Ababneh (2020) shared that the researcher must consider that there may be multiple realities in different geographic areas, even within the same school context. A final assumption was that we can only understand the experiences of complexity that Black female principals experience while leading low-performing schools from the Black female principals who lead them. To ensure the above assumptions were met, I recorded responses and interview notes to accurately reflect the participants' perspectives while maintaining confidentiality throughout the study.

Scope and Delimitations

The study was focused on Black female school principals' perceptions of preparation and training needed to manage complexity in low-performing schools due to the limited research on their perspectives in this area. Williams and Welsh (2017) shared

that, in their research, principals emphasized the importance of school context when leading schools. A picture of complexity management while leading low-performing schools by Black female principals is unclear. Therefore, gathering the thoughts of this population is essential in determining the unique needs of those leading in this environment.

The scope of this study was a small number of Black female school principals selected by purposive sampling based on specific research criteria. Setting research criteria for participation in the study is an essential part of the research (James et al., 2019). Selected participants were Black female principals currently leading in a U.S. K-12 public low-performing school or a former principal who led in a U.S. K-12 public low-performing school within the last three years. Participants resided within the United States. This sample size provided significant insight into the phenomenon being studied.

Limitations

One limitation of qualitative research is that participants have significant control over the collected data (Mohajan, 2018). Another limitation is the possible disclosure of participants' information which could cause unanticipated harm to the participant. I ensured that participants were unidentifiable by masking their identities. A third limitation was that separating my role during the study would be difficult. These roles include the role of a researcher/interviewer for the study, a current school leader, and a Black female leader. I ensured that my perceptions did not influence my decisions and create bias or distort information obtained during the data collection process. A final limitation included the use of purposive sampling which is often called judgement

sampling. Purposive sampling was used because it allows the researcher to decide what needs to be known and finds participants to provide that information (Etikan et al., 2016).

I used the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines to ensure ethical research and minimize researcher bias. I disclosed that I was an educator and former principal. I did not choose anyone I have supervised as a principal so that no one would be in the scope of my influence. In addition to the above, I maintained accurate records of the research during the research process through reflexive journaling, voice recordings, and interview transcripts. This ensured that there was an accurate account of the research process. I discuss these issues of trustworthiness in Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation.

Significance of the Study

The ESSA replaced the NCLB Act and sought to develop parameters to improve academic achievement for all students regardless of income, demographics, and other factors (U.S Department of Education, n.d.). Through ESSA, policymakers worked to create more equitable opportunities that benefit schools serving low-income, minority students (U.S Department of Education, n.d.). Sufficient preparation, training, and support of principals is also an essential component of ESSA. According to Title II of the policy, principals in failing schools should have access to comprehensive preparation programs to impact the lives of the students they serve. Examining the experiences of Black female principals can aid in fine-tuning current preparation programs.

Complex systems adapt in response to interactions with other components (Rosenhead et al., 2019). This study discussed schools as complex adaptive systems. It brings to light the functioning of the school system with a focus on what Black female

principals need to know about how to manage the complex nuances of the system that is their low-performing school. Gaining the perspectives of these leaders will inform efforts to fine-tune preparation programs to include complexity management in their course offerings to prepare principals for the challenging work of supporting low-performing schools.

The work of improving low-performing schools is a social change effort. Larey et al. (2021) included in their work that minority youth and their families had been impacted by a social structure that led to long-standing oppression. These societal structures of circumstances, such as poverty, affect their lives, influencing their identities and limiting their educational attainment (Larey et al., 2021). Structured practices must be examined so that conditions can be changed.

The education system is an institution that prepares the next generation of teachers, doctors, lawyers, and business owners. Minority students attend low-performing schools in large numbers, and children who attend low-performing schools experience less parental involvement, poverty, and learning difficulties (Larey et al., 2021). Due to circumstances surrounding the widening achievement gap, it is necessary to support the principals that lead this work (Wilkerson & Wilson, 2017). Black female principals already possess the resilience to impact students' lives and share an interconnectedness with their experiences. Revisiting preparation programs and training will fuel opportunities to improve student outcomes.

Summary

Chapter 1 outlined the study's problem statement, purpose, and background. It highlighted the research approach, a generic qualitative analysis, the study's significance, and the research questions. In Chapter 1, I also indicated the type of data gathered. This chapter addressed the study's research assumptions, scope delimitations, limitations, and significance. The above information was tied to the research purpose to give voice to the perceptions of Black female principals on preparation and training needed to manage complexity while leading low-performing schools. In Chapter 2, I review the literature on the study's theoretical foundation and explore the literature gap regarding the lack of research on what Black female principals believe is needed to manage complexity while leading low-performing schools.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Schools labeled as low-performing fail to make adequate yearly progress according to state and district achievement accountability metrics as defined by the 2001 NCLB Act (Cosner & Jones, 2016). Low-performing schools are typically located in low-income communities and are attended primarily by Black and Hispanic children.

Lee and Mao (2020) shared that while principals of varying backgrounds, ethnicities, and genders lead low-performing schools, many of these schools are led by Black women (Lomotey, 2019). This can happen for many reasons. Research by Dixon et al. (2021) suggested that in some cases, Black female leaders prefer to lead in schools with minority students. Weiner et al. (2022) suggested that Black women are placed in underperforming schools as change agents to fix what has failed under challenging circumstances. Driving sustainable change within turbulent school environments is challenging and requires a unique skillset with an intentional focus on context more than standardization practices (Slater, 2018). While Black female principals possess these unique characteristics, they struggle with harnessing these skills to manage complexities while leading low-performing schools. Overall, principal preparation programs have lagged in preparing principals to successfully address the rapidly changing world of education (Devi & Fernandes, 2019).

Challenging and often turbulent environments characterize the experiences of principals on the front lines of school improvement in low-performing schools, so support and training for Black female principals leading failing schools should prepare

them for leadership within complex environments. Flores (2018) noted that studies have embraced narratives of principals facing challenges while leading low-performing schools, but the perspectives and contributions of Black female principals in these roles have been overlooked. The voices of these principals need to be heard directly because they play a significant role in school improvement efforts in the low-performing schools they lead (Dixon et al., 2021). Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Black female principals serving in low-performing schools in various geographic locations within the United States to understand the specific preparation and support they believe is needed to lead while managing the complexity of the low-performing school context.

This literature review was organized to give the reader a broad perspective of the context of low-performing schools, including characteristics that impact improvement efforts and the policy initiatives designed to assist state and local agencies in meeting the high needs of struggling schools. Following the theoretical framework, complexity, and path dependency, the discussion will continue with characteristics of low-performing schools followed by preparation and policy.

The information presented first highlights societal inequalities and achievement gaps, two critical characteristics of failing schools, followed by a description of the federal ESSA of 2015 and its response to the lack of equity and access to education. I also discuss the topic of accountability and school turnaround to highlight the relevant issues that leaders of low-performing schools face while responding to the needs of their schools. The following sections consist of information related to principal preparation

programs and perspectives of satisfaction with the overall impact of traditional programs. I include an analysis of systems thinking and how each component above relates to low-performing schools' failure to thrive. The final section ties together the details of the literature review leading up to the methodology portion of this study in Chapter 3.

Literature Search Strategy

For the literature review, I used web-based resources to find researched literature on education policy, principal preparation programs, and what Black female principals believe is needed to lead sustainable change in low-performing schools. The search included peer-reviewed journals accessed from databases from the Walden University library. These databases included EBSCO host, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Public Policy and Administration, and Educational Leadership. The following keywords were used while searching for relevant literature: *low-performing schools, school turnaround, Black female principals leading low-performing schools, principal preparation programs, training for school principals of low-performing schools, female in educational leadership, systems theory, complex adaptive systems theory, complexity in schools, No Child Left Behind, Every Child Succeeds Act.*

Theoretical Foundation

Complex Adaptive Systems Theory

I used Buckley's (1968) complex adaptive systems theory as the framework for the research to provide context for the complexity of low-performing schools and what it means for the many Black female principals who lead them. The complex adaptive systems theory is derived from Von Bertalanffy's general systems theory (Dimmock et

al., 2021). General systems theory focuses on many interrelated variables and processes that affect each other in reciprocal relationships (Nadav et al., 2021). Complex adaptive systems theory also has its roots in complexity theory, which emphasizes the interactions of accompanying feedback and results in change within and between the parts of the system (Dimmock et al., 2021). While it has been argued that complexity theory has more of a mathematical structure due to its origin in science, it has also become prevalent in social science fields (Morcol, 2008). Theorists and public policy and administration researchers have found value in using complexity theory to explore many aspects of organizational management and change (Morcol, 2008).

The historical context of a well-functioning system describes a closed dynamic operating in equilibrium (Schwandt & Goldstein, 2008). However, complex adaptive systems (CAS) are quite the opposite. In his writing, *Society as a Complex Adaptive System*, Buckley (1968) noted the contrasting perspective that CAS are built while adapting and engaging in internal and external interactions. Buckley (1968) recognized system complexity and adaptation dynamics in correlation to social values and societal change (Schwandt & Goldstein, 2008). In the context of low-performing schools, this dynamic mirrored Von Bertalanffy's (1972) theory that systems encounter frustration as they are shaped through acting and reacting to environmental events. Sellberg et al. (2021) described CAS as resilient, adaptive, and transformable, with a normative orientation towards sustainability. Sellberg's (2021) conceptual framework of complex adaptive systems theory included the following six features relative to Buckley's school of thought:

1. System and component responsibilities and identities vary depending on the context.
2. Open boundaries allow the transfer of knowledge and energy.
3. Relationships include diversity and can immolate levels of hierarchy.
4. Nonlinear interactions are dynamic and vary with ongoing shifts due to feedback with the possibility of equilibrium.
5. Self-organization prompts memory and continuously adaptive processes without centralized control with the ability to anticipate.
6. Emergent system behaviors with complex cause-and-effect relationships prompting varying outcomes, unpredictability, and unintended consequences of interventions.

The complex adaptive systems theory provides a framework for understanding how systems of multiple, independent, and intelligent agents interact (Ueland et al., 2021). Holland (1992), another voice of complex adaptive systems theory, added that these systems are great in number and share the characteristics of evolution, aggregate behavior, and anticipation while undergoing a complex mix of simultaneous interactions. The premise of complex adaptive systems theory is that these systems contain adaptive components and capacities (Preiser et al., 2018). Interaction and interdependence among subsystems result in units acting semi-independently and unpredictably as they respond to local ecosystems (Dimmock et al., 2021). These adaptive components allow systems to change and evolve in response to feedback and changes in the system context (Preiser et al., 2018).

Ureland et al. (2021) noted that CAS exist in overlapping environments to create a whole with an identity apart from any of its components and a setting in which cause-and-effect relationships are rarely linear and predictable. Mischen and Jackson (2008) described CAS as agents co-evolving when they find themselves far from equilibrium. Complex systems are dynamic adaptations and evolution systems comprised of various components interrelated with each other and their environments, which endeavor to survive in contemporary, unpredictable environments (Fidan & Balci, 2017). These events simultaneously impact other system components (Shaked & Schechter, 2020). Systems run effectively when structures emerge based on finding effective relationships between components and fail because they struggle to adapt to their environment (Johnson, 2019).

System Complexity

Complex behavior occurs when there is an interaction between components of a system. Complex systems and organizations reorganize as they gain experience from events and interactions between components (Ozturk & Kizilkaya, 2017). As self-organizing entities, CAS primarily organize to achieve a stable state without external interference (Fidan & Balci, 2017). At their core, systems use information from their environments to reduce uncertainty about the range of appropriate responses (Johnson, 2019). Unfortunately, system rules and structures compromise the ability to reach this stable state. Dimmock et al. (2021) also claimed that CAS are unpredictable self-organizing systems constrained by order-generating rules. CAS are resilient and adapt to internal and external stimuli according to specific rule structures to move continually

toward the better realization of an ideal state as defined by those rules (Ueland et al., 2021).

System complexity presents a unique set of challenges in understanding system dynamics. From a theoretical perspective, complexity within a system focuses on an organization's behavior and how things change over time (Rosenhead et al., 2019). Some systems are sustained through competition between components, each working to maximize gain and minimize loss (Johnson, 2019). The tension between system components is instrumental in the growth and survival of a system. To the outside world, it may seem like a system failure as tension and disorder arise within the interworking of the system. Hollins (1992) affirmed that as time passes, the parts evolve in a Darwinian fashion, attempting to improve the ability of their kind to survive in their interactions with the surrounding parts. In contrast, Ueland et al. (2021) suggested that CAS requires capitalization on moments of disruption, often called the edge of chaos, to guide the system toward a different, more desired state. A school on the edge of chaos with the capacity to harness the events of the moment could use the experience as a source of innovation and differentiation (Fidan & Balci, 2017). The ability of the parts to adapt or learn is the pivotal characteristic of CAS (Hollins, 1992). With tension among components and system dynamics, chaos is not destructive as it would provide opportunities for Black female principals leading low-performing schools with new opportunities to be innovative in their approach to facilitating change. In an ideal state, the dynamic tension of relationships between components creates structures that will stand the test of time (Johnson, 2019).

Key Concepts

Schools as Complex Adaptive Systems

Schools are characterized as complex and deeply embedded in the external environment they interact with (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Complexity in schools encompasses system components in the form of perceptions, beliefs, and identities, where meaning is derived from how these components operate together. (Shaked & Schechter, 2020). Dimmock et al. (2021) shared that education systems are complex structures with dynamic network interactions paralleled at the school level. Shaked & Schechter (2020) further described other critical components of school systems as the people, events, and processes, in addition to the culture of the people who make up the system and how they affect the decisions made on behalf of the school, its functioning, and circumstances.

Systems thinking in education provides a unique perspective on the interworking of the components that impact the trajectory of low-performing schools. Knowledge of the intricate details of the interaction of system parts can help facilitate change. Morcol (2008) argued that leaders must understand the nature of social networks within their organizations to meet their goals. Elimeski (2021) shared that systems thinking is the fifth discipline in understanding the building blocks of system capacity. Understanding schools as socially complex adaptive systems may help education professionals to explain some of the challenges of fostering and sustaining the improvement of low-performing schools over time (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Elimeski stressed that school improvement begins with acknowledging that no individual or entity controls the whole truth and does not have all the resources to initiate, implement and sustain change. In

their research, Chen-Levi et al. (2020) analyzed data from 154 school management team members to explore the team's system thinking. Study findings showed that school functioning improved once staff members began to understand the system and their role within its functioning.

The systems approach allows the improvement process to develop a shared understanding of issues before attempting to solve them (Elimeski, 2021). The complexity of improving low-performing schools involves understanding the relationship between parts of the system both inside and outside of the school. It is important not to focus on components in isolation but to view the interaction of components with the characteristics of an organized whole (Johnson, 2019). Understanding and improving systems can significantly impact the community globally, fueling overall favorable family outcomes (Chen-Levi et al., 2020).

The Challenge of Complexity

For low-performing schools, complexity is heightened, and chaos may seem like the norm as leaders focus on managing people and processes. Chen-Levi et al. (2020) highlighted this complexity with a multidimensional view of leadership within a school's improvement environment. Leadership in schools from the context of complex environments requires the capacity to consider several aspects of a given perspective while facilitating consideration of various issues from multiple viewpoints using cognitive switching to bring solutions to the complex issue. With the demand of strenuous cognitive thinking and impromptu decision-making, leaders are expected to position their schools to adapt. Fidan and Balci (2017) suggested that schools must

continuously adapt to change as components within the larger system constantly change, including various policy issues and state controls regulating the production of educational services. Elimeski (2021) highlighted the increase in complexity as school leaders face change contingent on constructive relationships between catalysts at various levels in the decision-making hierarchy of the school system. The involvement of numerous actors, such as parents, governments, and teacher unions, in decision-making, adds new layers to organizational structures and processes. It impacts an organization's stability and functioning (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Emison (2008) described the relationship between these components as nonlinear and dynamic, prompting the ongoing adaptation process.

The Challenge of Path Dependency

Schools organize as a complex adaptive system during development depending on past experiences (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Preiser et al. (2018) noted that CAS have a memory and the capacity to learn from previous responses and configurations to influence and shape current and future system trajectories. Complexity theorists stressed the need to understand the routines that emerge and guide behavior patterns (Morcol, 2008). Patterns are set, and the paths are determined before individuals are selected for principal roles. Fidan and Balci (2017) suggested that the direction of the future evolution of the school depends on the critical choices made within the complex environment signaling that schools cannot escape their past. From their research, Dimmock et al. (2021) shared those external enablers shaped schools' internal enablers. Fidan and Balci highlighted the impact of simultaneous interactions with internal and external factors on organizational functioning. Loga et al. (2022) suggested that with path dependency,

changes occur due to initial choices that later determine the organization's development. With path dependency, once a pathway forms, it is challenging for alternative actions to take place (Loga et al., 2022).

The Challenge in School Improvement

In his book, *A Complexity Theory of Public Policy*, Morcol (2012) acknowledged that policy itself is complex and posed whether complexity should be simplified or recognized. School improvement continues to present challenges for education agencies. Dimmock et al. (2021) asserted that it has been problematic for schools to implement such complex reforms. The history of the interactions of components affects the development of CAS (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Due to the complexities involved with school improvement, viewing schools as complex adaptive systems provide a framework for a deeper understanding of how principals chosen to lead these schools can facilitate improvement. Schools also undertake local adaptations contingent on external influences from local, state, and federal entities (Dimmock et al., 2021). Meeting the needs of diverse learners, managing the one size fits all rules to instruction, and solutions based on a standard services approach to school programming pose barriers to improvement (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Recognizing complexity provides context for how we view school improvement. Regarding reform and complexity, Dimmock et al. focused on the impact of federal comprehensive transformation policies characterized by multiple, connected, and simultaneous changes to factors like curriculum, instruction, assessment, teacher training, school leadership, and the presence of autonomy.

Schools are microsystems and part of larger ecosystems often set up according to hierarchical order (Dimmock et al., 2021). As a barrier to improvement, leadership at the macro level assumes a lack of decision-making maturity at the middle and bottom levels, leading to the top-down approach (Elimeski, 2021). As part of larger public systems, federal entities regulate schools subject to centrally administered policies leading to the formation of pathways. As discussed previously, paths are determined due to the response to complexity brought on by the interaction of system components, such as school improvement parameters. School improvement emanates from external influences like policy mandates and guidance (Dimmock et al., 2021). CAS are nonlinear and have casual effects between and within system components and view system equilibrium as multiple, temporary, and moving (Preiser et al., 2018). Dimmock et al. (2021) further explained that educational system reform is characterized by nonlinear cause-and-effect scenarios where school adaptations to whole system reform are often unpredictable.

The historical development of systems, in this case, low-performing schools, often reveals that schools have become dependent on the persistent dysfunction of the school system (Laird, 2020). Loga et al. (2022) argued that school systems at the macro level embrace changes embedded in the system, which offer increasing returns leading to investment. This creates a dependency of agencies on the new path created by the shift (Loga et al., 2022). Research confirms that schools are resilient, adaptive systems. Dimmock et al. (2021) asserted that according to complex adaptive systems theory, the possibility of schools being adaptive, agentic organizations that can mediate a whole system change at the local level is a reality. However, the fact remains that leaders must

continue to contend with the complexities of leading improvement in a low-performing school while facilitating improvement based on a system they cannot change.

Low-Performing School Context

Low-performing schools are generally located in urban areas with many community risk factors. Research by Wilkerson and Wilson (2017) highlighted that Black female principals are routinely placed in some of the lowest-performing schools with fewer resources and support. Understanding the dynamics of the conditions in low-performing schools can significantly impact efforts in leading improvement and provide context for what preparation is necessary to manage the complexities of the system dynamic. Parshiaridis et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study of two principals who led low-performing schools in Cyprus. Findings from the study emphasized school context as the determining factor of disparities in the experiences of the two principals. In the study, the school with the lower socioeconomic status experienced heightened challenges that impeded the principal's ability to address all students' needs sufficiently. Parshiaridis et al. (2018) also noted in their study that home conditions for some students, such as lack of basic food and clothing and low parental involvement in their child's academic progress, contributed to the overall low performance of the high poverty school. In their research, Cosner and Jones (2016) suggested that leaders commonly faced challenges in low-performing schools that were far greater than those experienced by leaders of high-performing schools. These challenges not only have a significant impact on communities surrounding the school, but it also creates a myriad of challenges for school leaders

working to facilitate an environment where schools can thrive despite their characteristics.

Principals of low-performing schools must focus on what happens inside of the school and consider contributing factors of low performance outside of the building. Inside the school, leaders must address periods of high faculty and staff turnover associated with the impact of working in troubling conditions within the school (VanGronigen & Meyer, 2019). In their research, Burnside et al. (2018) contended that students who lived in low-income neighborhoods struggled significantly with student achievement, presenting unique challenges for school principals to meet achievement metrics. VanGronigen and Meyer (2019) added from their research of state turnaround efforts that lower daily attendance rates also meant fewer students were engaged in educational practices, further impacting improvement efforts for the principal. Outside the school, students must contend with the stigma of single-parent households, incarcerated family members, low income, and drug abuse within the community (Cosner & Jones, 2016). Parent involvement is also a factor, as some parents are less connected and present within the surrounding community which can be attributed to years of societal inequalities (VanGronigen & Meyer, 2019).

Societal Inequalities

In 1848, education pioneer Horace Mann cultivated the idea that education would level the playing field for all people (Hung et al., 2019). He envisioned that public education would provide equal opportunity for all to experience its benefits. Over a century later, some may argue that education is quite the opposite--an equalizer of

inequalities tied to race, ethnicity, and income (Hung et al., 2019). Demathews (2018) noted the devastating impact of historical, political, economic, and social marginalization on a school's performance over time. In a narrative analysis of 15 Black female principals, de Bruyn and Mestry (2020) shared that conditions that plagued low-performing schools were widely believed, in part, to be a byproduct of years of societal inequality.

In addition to societal barriers, structural inequalities deeply rooted in today's society present unique challenges for school leaders to improve low-performing schools. Hung et al. (2019) claimed systemic structural inequalities, including racism, gender, socioeconomic status, and identity, have significantly impacted the education system and informed its practices. In reviewing the case of *Leandro v. the State of North Carolina*, Oakes et al. (2021) discussed the connection between socioeconomic status, race, and educational opportunities and school funding in the state of North Carolina. In their report, Oakes et al. (2021) linked systematic barriers, such as unequal funding of schools to race. According to the report, high-poverty schools with students of color had less access to resources than White students also attending high-poverty schools (Oakes et al., 2021). Research from Hung et al. (2020) also focused on unequal access to resources in which schools in communities where parents had high educational attainment were likely to be exposed to more resources than schools with a lower percentage of educational attainment within the community.

Societal inequalities prevalent in low-income areas also impact the work of school leaders. In their study, VanGronigen and Meyer (2019) argued that high-priority schools

in high-crime, low-income, under-resourced urban areas presented immense challenges for leaders in improving low-performing schools. In their study of two high-priority schools led by Black female principals in the southeastern part of the United States, Wilkerson and Wilson (2017) emphasized that adolescent delinquent behavior impacted student attendance and lowered the academic performance of students who participated in such activities. Data from the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) also suggested that issues like these influence student behaviors within the schools, leading to higher suspensions, expulsions, and increased dropout rates. These factors influence outcomes for students living in low-income areas, further widening the achievement gap between minority and White children.

Achievement Gap

Factors associated with geographic location, community characteristics such as race and ethnicity, and unsuccessful programs and practices perpetuate the gap in student achievement. Learning agencies compare the performance of subpopulations within a school to determine achievement gaps on formative, cumulative, and standardized state, local, and federal assessments. Subpopulations evaluated as a part of the achievement gap include various student groups such as White, Black, Hispanic, Multiracial, and Asian, and low socioeconomic, special education service recipients, and English language learners.

Communities surrounding low-performing schools are a microcosm of a society functioning within a system of inequality where skin color is still a factor in the likelihood of educational attainment. Black students still experience varying degrees of

racial segregation, leading to inequality in education. In a study connecting the achievement gap and discipline outcomes across the United States, Gopalan (2019) shared that the Black-White achievement gap begins as early as kindergarten and continues throughout high school. Hung et al. (2020) made a striking claim in their study that being a Black student in the school system could be a disadvantage for students of a demographic group already experiencing obstacles from being born out of marginalization. In their study of the experiences of three Black female principals in the United States, Hung et al. found that gaps were primarily prevalent in the southern and southwest areas of the country. Within these geographic areas, characteristics like economic and racial inequality, the disparity in adult educational attainment, and unemployment were present in family systems (Hung et al., 2020). These factors continue to impact school improvement efforts in low-income communities significantly.

Marginalized students of color not only have to compete with the risk factors prevalent in the geographic areas in which they live, but they also must contend with, in many cases, access to substandard programming. Gopalan (2019) suggested a strong correlation between racial/ethnic achievement gaps and socioeconomic conditions in some geographic regions but also highlighted the need for changes in instructional practices. Low-performing schools routinely need help with teacher quality and need to consider factors like demographic teacher match (Gopalan, 2019). In some low-performing school settings, districts and states may require programming that merely touches the surface of school improvement but fails to adequately address the critical needs within and around the school resulting in low achievement for students of color on

standardized tests (Hung et al., 2020). In some cases, these structured initiatives interfere with the school improvement process. Woofin (2019) shared research from a 9-month principal preparation program to train principals to take over a school needing dramatic improvement. In the study, it was evident that learning agencies emphasized multiple and often competing strategies for academic gains and short improvement trajectories as practices to support improvement. Flores (2018) also pointed out that the lack of relevant resources, support, and opportunity routinely accessible to schools in other geographic areas contributes to low student achievement. In another study accessing public opinion about the responsibility of school improvement, Schueler and West (2021) shared that targeted improvement by takeover yielded worse outcomes for majority-Black school districts.

Research has shown that the United States has struggled to address the achievement gap successfully. Flores (2018) referred to a Phi Delta Kappa Gallop poll from 2012 which confirmed that 89% of participants believed that closing the achievement gap was somewhat of a milestone. Pooled data reflecting low achievement on standardized assessments for third through eighth-grade students over five years also proved that the learning agencies in the United States still struggled to successfully address the achievement gap problem (Hung et al., 2020). The impact of the failure to close the achievement gap reaches far beyond individual student progress and has spanned years of catastrophic failure.

The culmination of the factors associated with closing the gap perpetuates a system in which low-performing schools struggle to make overall gains. Flaws in the

education system continue to significantly impact the student achievement of less fortunate students (Flores, 2018). Despite several federal and state-enacted policy initiatives, the achievement gap in the education system still exists. The goal to prompt learning agencies to address the disparity in the achievement of student groups is still a high priority. While policy initiatives are enacted with great intent to support growth and achievement in struggling schools, the reality for the principals who lead these schools is that historical systemic barriers continuously derail their attempts to facilitate change.

School Turnaround

School turnaround is a multifaceted, systematic way of intervening in the operations of low-performing schools. With the help of federal policy initiatives, states facilitate turnaround according to the needs of their districts and schools. For example, the Race to the Top (2009) national funding initiative was a policy established as a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to assist states and districts with improving chronically low-performing schools (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019).

Education agencies intervene in low-performing schools with a systematic approach of targeted actions to reform educational practices that will improve the overall school. While there are many ways to phrase turnaround, the fundamental techniques are the same. State and local agencies define turnaround as the reconstruction of practices within a low-performing school to improve student achievement. Hitt and Meyer (2018) described the turnaround as the accelerated and often extreme measures initiated within the bottom 5% of schools achieving only 20%-point gains in 2 years in math and English language arts. Reitzun and Hewitt (2017) shared that school turnaround is the presence of

dynamic tensions that intensify pressure on responsive decision-making. These tensions exist between focusing on the mission and personal connection, high expectations and trust and respect; strong leader and staff presence; and disrupting complacency and continuity (Reitzun & Hewitt, 2017).

As stated above, turnaround practices include targeted actions often implemented systematically. Education agencies that seek federal funding for turnaround must adhere to specific funding guidelines. At its inception, the Race to the Top initiative (2009) gained momentum as education agencies worked to intervene in low-performing school operations. States had to choose one of the following high-leverage actions to receive funding:

- school redesign – replace the principal and half of the staff.
- restart – convert the school into a charter school:
- transformation – retain all staff except the principal; and
- school closure – send students to a higher-performing school (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019).

Coupled with a focused turnaround initiative is the work of the campus leader. Drawing from the work of 53 empirical studies, Hitt and Meyer (2018) described the following five actions that turnaround leadership should include when facilitating and maintaining improvement:

- communicate a collaborative vision.
- prioritize student learning experiences.
- facilitate effective learning communities for teachers.

- practice distributed leadership.
- cultivate relationships with families and the community.

Failure of School Turnaround

Despite federal funding initiatives, systematic practices, and targeted leader actions, turnaround efforts often fail. According to Meyers (2019), school districts have struggled to find their place in their intentional effort for school improvement. State, district, and school leaders can measure sustained progress by reviewing data that indicates that a school could protect the gains made with the successful implementation of turnaround practices and maintain growth for at least four additional years (Hitt & Meyer, 2018). Unfortunately, while many schools in active turnaround status make gains, there is little evidence of growth and transformation that will move the school out of the bottom percentile of achievement metrics and lead to sustained improvement. (Hitt & Meyers, 2018). Critics of turnaround acknowledged the presence of reform but the absence of change (Meyers, 2019). Research by Meyers (2019) also questioned the role of school districts in school turnaround, citing that districts can overcome challenges experienced in low-performing schools by prioritizing needs.

Turnaround efforts thrive on the ability of states and districts to adequately fund and support campus leadership in all aspects of the process. Research by VanGronigen and Meyer (2019) found that states struggled to turn around low-performing schools under the 2001 NCLB Act. Data from the 2013-2014 school year confirmed that 4,900 schools in the United States were labeled priority schools. Although states have worked to guide the successful turnaround of the policy, the evidence confirmed that gaps in

resource provision supported the need for more expertise by state and local education agencies to develop and facilitate effective responses to low performance (VanGronigen & Meyer, 2019). Woulfin and Weiner (2019) noted that efforts needed to focus on the interrelationship between policy, community, and the patterns within low-performing schools. According to VanGroigen and Meyer (2019), with somewhat failed efforts and after the enactment of NCLB, almost 2.5 million students in the United States were still enrolled in low-performing schools, further sounding the alarm for adjustments in education policy.

Accountability

Federal, state, and district officials set accountability metrics to determine the success or failure of schools. Despite a rigorous and research-based approach, these metrics are believed by some to impose more harm than good on disadvantaged students (Huilla, 2019). The Huilla (2019) study noted how accountability systems exposed students to inequality and impacted student-teacher relationships. Cosner and Jones (2016) affirmed that while leaders at the state level deemed that accountability systems were meant to better support school improvement, over time, they had become a source of stress and angst for principals who lead the charge in low-performing schools.

Accountability drives, in large part, many of the decisions made by school principals. According to Huilla (2019), educational policies developed at the national level define the aim and targets of schooling within state and local areas. The NCLB Act was one such policy enacted in 2001, which proposed that school leaders could increase student achievement through a program of early standardized testing that informed

accountability ratings (Cosner & Jones, 2016). It rated levels of student achievement on standardized tests with an intentional focus on student growth (Cosner & Jones, 2016).

Policymakers designed accountability metrics as a part of NCLB (2001) to hold the lowest-performing schools accountable for improving student achievement and overall levels of school performance (Cosner & Jones, 2016). Lawmakers intended to monitor and hold education agencies responsible for achievement with NCLB (2001). However, a gap existed in successfully integrating the policy initiatives within the disadvantaged school context (Huilla, 2019). Education officials implementing a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement failed to consider the unresolved issues of low-performing schools (Cosner & Jones, 2016).

School improvement is far more complex than holding principals accountable for student achievement. Chronically low-performing schools generally perform in the bottom 5% of each state while facing various challenges outside the principal's control (VanGronigen et al., 2017). Leaders in low-performing schools struggle to navigate high-stakes accountability measures while simultaneously meeting the overwhelming needs of staff, students, and the community (Cosner & Jones, 2016). In their study addressing a framework for improving struggling schools, Cosner and Jones (2016) shared that the magnitude of problems within low-performing schools undermined the capacity to improve. Huilla (2019) stressed a need for more research on actual school improvement outside of accountability, focusing on discrepancies in socioeconomic inequality. Additional challenges Cosner and Jones (2019) shared included school safety, student behaviors, and prioritizing steps in the improvement process.

Research supports the need to move beyond numbers and compliance to focus on the critical needs of failing schools. Huilla (2019) challenged the effectiveness of the NCLB legislature, which set into motion accountability practices that are present in today's educational system. In research analyzing 69 qualitative studies presented in prestigious academic journals, Huilla (2019) explored the relationship between improving disadvantaged schools and test-based accountability. Schueler and West (2021) contended in their study that while federal grants from the ESSA showed positive effects in some states, there was little data to show nationwide improvement within low-performing schools. Focusing on outcomes without room for error and caring beyond results and stability created a mechanical view of people and their ability to perform the work (Huilla, 2019). The study claimed that, while accountability was essential in ensuring students' academic growth and goal attainment, it also distinguished 'good schools' from 'bad schools' through the success or failure of test outcomes (Huilla, 2019). In their study, Schueler and West (2021) emphasized that Black schools are often labeled as 'bad' and face school closure when they fail to meet accountability. This perspective on accountability paints a stark picture of the environment in which these principals lead.

While accountability is necessary for student achievement, prescriptive accountability measures are not always adaptable to every context and school. In their study of turnaround leadership, Dixon et al. (2021) concluded that school improvement is an arduous process contingent on numerous factors outside of accountability. While this is true, in their study, Cosner and Jones (2016) shared that low-performing schools

generally received an unsatisfactory rating and were targeted for increased guidance, support, and monitoring by district and state education agencies (Cosner & Jones, 2016). School administrators under pressure to make rapid improvements face the upending consequences of leading an academically unacceptable school. In essence, current accountability practices do more to pressure the principal with the possibility of restructuring, transformation, or even school closure than to facilitate a targeted improvement plan to support their leadership within their challenging environments (Cosner & Jones, 2016). In addition to the challenges in school improvement, principals of schools that fall short of meeting accountability standards have the added pressure to advocate for students and parents who oppose targeted takeovers over of their schools in hopes of being awarded more time to make improvement (Schueler & West, 2021).

Principal Preparation

Over time, the focus of principal preparation programs has covered a wide range of components. Programs have focused mainly on leadership and its impact on climate and culture regarding getting buy-in from teachers and staff (Williams & Welsh, 2017). Meyers (2020) shared that the role of the principal spans far beyond school operations, climate, organization, and student achievement. Student accountability has been a significant focus of the work of principals; however, over time, the pressures of accountability systems have impacted the ability of school leaders to lead successful improvement.

Williams and Welsh (2017) analyzed data on principal perceptions of leadership. They concluded that supporting principal candidates with tools to improve a school's

academic standing by meeting accountability standards is essential in addition to developing skills to implement context-specific actions to lead a low-performing school out of its underperforming status. Wilkerson and Wilson (2017) cited from their study that two Black female principals believed they did not receive enough preparation upon entering their roles as principals of low-performing schools. Hence, traditional preparation programs have failed to deliver content that meets the needs of the current state of education for schools labeled as failing. The following section explores the impact of school context and the shortfalls in principal preparation programs and processes.

The Impact of School Context

Preparation programs ensure that principals have the tools to address the challenges inherent in turning around low-performing schools. However, as shared above, navigating the often-turbulent contextual environment surrounding a failing school is an immense challenge due to the numerous difficulties facing the communities surrounding these schools. Data from a study by Williams and Welsh (2017) provided a leadership perspective on how societal issues that ravage communities and schools are often far beyond the control of the school. Societal issues stemming from long-standing systemic injustices signify the need school leaders to be able to address circumstances that arise (DeMatthews, 2018).

Research further captures the difficulties principals face in addressing the needs of schools in a low-performing context. Parhiardis et al. (2018) gathered data from various sources to determine the effects of the involvement of the principals in two low-

performing schools within two different contexts in Cyprus. Data from the study confirmed that the geographic location of the school, as well as the circumstances imminent within the community surrounding the school, were contributing factors to how the two school leaders interacted in the school environment (Parhiardis et al., 2018). The principal of the school, located in an area where the socioeconomic status of families in the community was low, was consumed with calming the chaos, addressing behaviors within the school, and curtailing outside influences. These challenges impeded the principal's ability to make headway on progress to improve the school.

Principals must also be well versed in navigating challenges and understanding the impact that community context has on improvement inside of the school. In these settings, students generally struggle to learn at the rate expected. In their study, Williams and Welsh (2017) noted that school principals identified context, precisely socioeconomic status, as a determining factor in the success or lack of success in meeting student achievement goals. In schools, teachers grapple with best practices for achieving success while enduring the stress of working in high-priority environments. Further noted in the study by Williams and Welsh, were that the circumstances surrounding the students' life in the school significantly impacted how teachers taught and how students learned the content. In their multi-perspective case study, Parhiardis et al. (2018) asserted that context must be a priority in how school leaders prepare for school improvement.

Failure of Traditional Programs

Preparation programs have traditionally dismissed the realities of serving low-income, high-need schools, leaving principals seeking a more rigorous preparation

process to obtain enhanced knowledge and skills for the work. In their qualitative study of principal perspectives of preparation programs, Parshiaridis et al. (2018) asserted that leading low-performing schools is a far more significant challenge that requires a broader skill set than curriculum components of traditional preparation programs. As the number of low-performing schools has continued to fluctuate, policymakers, university faculty, and educators have concluded that the conventional approach to principal preparation is no longer sufficient (Shaked, 2019). Williams and Welsh (2017) claimed that traditional programs must adequately prepare school leaders for the complexities and implications of opportunity gaps in low-performing schools. Some argue that leading low-performing schools is a matter of justice, and that principal must know how to advocate for the crucial needs of the school. Many university principal preparation programs do not explicitly address these issues of equity or social justice (Stone-Johnson et al., 2021).

ESSA was signed into law in December 2015 by President Barack Obama. It reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (1965) and replaced the NCLB Act of 2001. ESSA mirrors accountability measures instituted by NCLB and prioritizes the contribution of school leaders to the success of their students. Among the nine priorities of ESSA, Title II focuses on preparing and training high-quality teachers, school principals and other school leadership (ESSA, 2015). ESSA aims to ensure high-quality educational opportunities for all students with a dual focus on closing achievement gaps (Cook-Harvey et al., (2016).

Policymakers established the ESSA to address equity issues in education across states. Lawmakers believed that state education agencies and school districts were the

best suited to determine the needs of their students. The ESSA allowed states to use funding and other resources to close the achievement gap and improve academic achievement for all students (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). As a part of the legislation, states are responsible for defining what equity looks like in their schools and work to ensure consistency in the use of funding (Yiting, 2019). ESSA allows state agencies to ensure every child gets a high-quality, well-rounded education while preserving equity in its practices. Through ESSA, policymakers created more funding opportunities for states to ensure equity in schools with underserved students (Kostyo et al., 2018). Priorities included access to learning opportunities focusing on higher-order thinking skills, multiple equity measures, provision and accessibility to resources, and practical interventions (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016).

To date, there is concern that states have veered off the course in ensuring equity for all students due, in part, to data that suggests that conditions are waning in their responsibilities of reporting performance levels of subpopulations (All4Ed, 2020). When states fail to report accurate data at the state level, the Department of Education will have flawed data on the impact of ESSA initiatives (Hyslop, 2018).

Inconsistency in accountability reporting leads to flawed and inaccurate data surrounding accountability which gives an inaccurate picture of the needs of low-performing schools and what measures are needed to improve them. Education policy is one part of the system of education that impacts the whole. Intentional efforts to improve student academic performance across the country are contingent on many factors, including performance. Lack of alignment between policy, improvement, achievement,

and leadership profoundly affects how the education system works holistically to educate our most vulnerable populations.

Summary and Conclusions

As a system within a broader system, education agencies continue to explore ways to develop school principals at every level to ensure the upward trajectory of school improvement. Given the complexities within and around the school environment, this can be a challenge for Black female principals charged with leading low-performing schools. Traditional principal preparation programs have fallen short in effectively equipping principals to lead low-performing schools, leaving some principals to depend on personal experiences and their intersecting identities rather than effective strategies to manage complexities. The culmination of policy, mitigation of barriers, and the unique skill set of managing complexities are necessary components of the school improvement process. This literature review included several considerations for policy changes to better support principals of low-performing schools. Chapter 3 details the process followed in conducting the study and presentation of the data and results.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Low-performing schools continue to fall below academic accountability performance standards and need help sustaining improvement amidst complex conditions. This study explored and gave voice to the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools so that educational and political leaders can understand what is needed for principal preparation programs amid an education system consumed by complexity, particularly within underserved communities. The perspectives of these principals can help inform policy decisions about what is essential in the preparation, training, and support needed to lead in this high-stakes environment.

In this chapter, I describe the research design rationale, methodology, and characteristics of a generic qualitative study as it relates to the study's purpose and research question. I explain my role as the researcher, the participant selection process, research setting, sampling protocol, data collection, and data analysis plan. In addition, I share strategies for addressing issues of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Research Design and Rationale

For this study, I used a general qualitative research design. This design provided the context for hearing the voices of the Black female principals that routinely lead low-performing schools. The research questions for this study were the following:

- RQ1: How do Black female principals describe the essential components of preparation, training, and support needed to manage complexities in low-performing schools?
- RQ2: How can the experiences of Black female principals of low-performing schools inform policies and programs to support them in leading improvement efforts successfully?

In this study, I explored perceptions of Black female principals leading change in low-performing elementary schools. I chose the qualitative method over the quantitative approach for several reasons. Quantitative research embraces positivism, affirming that the researcher can observe reality objectively (Al-Ababneh, 2020). With this philosophy, researchers conduct studies without influence by personal feelings or opinions and without impacting the real problem. It is a well-structured methodology with quantifiable observations and statistical analysis (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Positivism supports that only one reality is independent of the observer. From this perspective, knowledge of the world is governed by law, prompting scientists to discover that law (Ejnavarzala, 2019). In contrast, with qualitative research, the commonly used underlying philosophy is interpretivism (Al-Ababneh, 2020).

Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge, specifically, the knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon (Al-Ababneh, 2020). It is a way of making sense of the world through theories of knowledge underpinning what knowledge is and what counts as knowledge (Ejnavarzala, 2019). From an epistemological perspective, I believe people are experts in their own experiences and that the way to determine the reality of a

phenomenon is to hear from those experiencing it, which aligns with an interpretivist philosophy. Interpretivism assumes that the researcher observes the world around them and that reality is unique to each observer (Al-Ababneh, 2020). To interpret and understand the phenomena, the researcher must set aside their perceptions and learn the culture of what is being studied (Ejnavarzala, 2019). This philosophy asserts that the social world is too complex to reduce to law-like generalizations (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Interpretivism supports the idea that each experience is unique, differs in some way from others, and aligns with the qualitative research method.

Low-performing schools have common characteristics specific to their context. While similar traits can be attributed to schools with the same characteristics, the level at which these factors contribute to each low-performing school varies. How these factors characterize the experiences of individuals within the school and community may be very different. Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences to understand their reality (Mohajan, 2018). While systemic realities exist in research, such as the general characteristics of low-performing schools, the experiences of the principals that serve differ based on the factors specific to their schools. Al-Ababneh (2020) asserted that with subjectivism, no actual realities exist independent of perception. Qualitative researchers are interested in the experiences and beliefs of people and their meaning systems based on their perspectives (Mohajan, 2018). In my qualitative study, I sought to understand the reality of Black female principals from their perceptions through their sharing of experiences within the context of their work.

I considered several qualitative approaches for this study, including case study, narrative, grounded theory, and generic qualitative. A case study considers various aspects of a particular phenomenon, such as cultures and customs (Van Tiem et al., 2021). It focuses on the whole of a specific event from the individual's viewpoint (Clare, 2020). The case study design aligns differently from present research due to its narrowed focus on a particular event as opposed to experiences, which were the subject of this research.

The narrative approach gives an account or tells a story about the phenomena from the research participant's perspective. Personal stories present a true positional identity from a unique perspective that aids in understanding the phenomenon from a unique perspective (Clare, 2020). The narrative approach, which may incorporate written narratives from research participants, makes the stories more accurate and gives the researcher a clearer idea of the experiences and other associated aspects (Di Palma & Reid, 2021). The purpose of this study was not to analyze stories related to personal values, interests, and passions of Black female principals leading low-performing schools; instead, it was to understand the lived experiences of these school leaders to impact policy decisions for training.

I also considered using grounded theory, another approach to qualitative research. Grounded theory is an iterative process in which the same process is followed multiple times in the same manner to gather and analyze the data (Wright et al., 2022). It is a process in which the researcher collects and analyzes data while seeking to derive theory from emerging themes (Clare, 2020). This research approach focuses on the how instead

of the what in the research. The grounded theory approach did not align with the purpose of this study since the focus was on the experiences of Black female principals in low-performing schools to prompt policy change in training and support.

Qualitative research provides detailed descriptions of real-life settings that can help close the gap between practitioner and researcher (Esteve & Lee, 2018). Using a generic qualitative approach allowed for adaptability and flexibility within the research itself, making it applicable to select individuals from varying backgrounds and experiences relative to the focus of the research (Kohler et al., 2022).

In summary, case study, narrative, and grounded theory were not conducive to conducting this study for the following reasons: The case study approach is limited in its scope, characteristics of participants, and or phenomenon. The narrative approach includes retelling experiences but may stop short of defining a clear direction after gathering data. Grounded theory begins with data gathering and then the determination of theory.

When considering the research topic, the quantitative approach did not align with the phenomenon or the research questions. From an ontological paradigm, quantitative research correlates reality to facts beyond influence (Liu, 2022). Yilmaz (2013) shared that quantitative research explains a phenomenon according to numerical data and is objective. I was most interested in learning about experiences so that a determination can be made on the best way to prepare Black female principals to lead low-performing schools. From the ontological orientation, qualitative research asserts that reality is socially constructed with multiple contexts and versions (Liu, 2022).

Quantitative researchers conduct their studies independently of the studied subjects (Yilmaz, 2013). Qualitative research allows the researcher to build on theory from observation and participant involvement (Brachie et al., 2021). This provides the opportunity to understand experiences that help develop themes that will impact the research from the participants' perspective. Epistemologically, researchers using the quantitative approach work separately from the phenomenon, focusing on objectivity during the research process (Liu, 2022). Qualitative researchers stand inside the process and interact with the phenomenon being studied from a subjective point of view (Liu, 2022). Brachie et al. (2021) highlighted that although quantitative research is widely used in leadership research, qualitative research is more equipped to explore leadership from the perspective of engagement with actual study participants. Black female principals leading change in low-performing schools experience their roles differently than principals leading in other schools. They hold different perceptions, and this is the focus of the study.

The qualitative method conducts in-depth inquiries within a small sample of populations (Bhattacharya, 2017). It is vital to gain insight into the experiences to understand the needs of Black women in leadership in low-performing schools. I selected the generic qualitative approach for several reasons. A generic qualitative approach works within the framework of human experiences and permits the exploration of perceptions from research participants (Bhattacharya, 2017). The researcher uses data collection methods such as interviews, observations, artifacts, and other relevant avenues to help understand the topic to derive meaning from the research (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this qualitative study was to conduct the study to understand the experiences of the research participants (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Bhattacharya (2017) further emphasized that the researcher's role is to communicate participant thoughts and feelings about the study's focus from emerging themes as this will help encompass their perspectives. I was also an instrument in the qualitative research process. Yoon and Uliassi (2022) shared that, as an instrument, the researcher plays a vital role in data collection, interpretation, and presentation. As an instrument in the research process, the researcher defines the meaning of data at all stages (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). As the researcher, I collected and analyzed descriptive data from interviews and assigned common themes reflective of interview responses. Using qualitative research provides an opportunity to gather information about the perspectives of study participants based on their experiences (Stickley et al., 2022).

The researcher plays a significant role in collecting, interpreting the information, and presenting study findings (Boon & Uliassi, 2022). Using the inductive analysis approach to develop themes from data was the basis for comparing responses from various participant interviews. When studying human behavior, researchers must be mindful of their own culturally formed thoughts and careful not to project their values onto the research participant (Karagiozis, 2018). In this study, there was a focus on the proper use of data collected to inform the themes of the study rather than the use of my perceptions as the researcher in interpreting the data presented by the participants. When the researcher is positioned as a co-creator of dialogue with research participants, the

possibility of truth-telling will be augmented (Boon & Uliassi, 2022). I recorded any personal reflections that arose through journaling during the data collection to ensure research credibility. Memos include notes on the body language and reactions of the participants to specific questions to provide information on unspoken data, such as uneasiness observed and what it may represent.

In addition to the measures mentioned above, I took extra precaution to eliminate unconscious bias and not allow my preference, knowledge, and experience to support a particular perspective. As a former principal, I have knowledge and experience in the principal role within a low-performing school. For example, having a shared background or other similarities does not guarantee that we experience the same phenomena (Karagiozis, 2018). Even though I may share the same culture, background, and experiences as participants in the study, I had to be careful not to allow it to influence the interview process and outcomes.

I used bracketing to confront and manage any biases that I may have. When a researcher takes steps to minimize bias in a study, they get an accurate account of the data collected during the research process and ensure integrity, accuracy, and trustworthiness (Shufutinsky, 2020). In the research process, values and moral conflicts arise, often not recognized by the researcher (Karagiozis, 2018). With bracketing, the researcher examines their own narrative, including their history, knowledge, culture, experience, value, or academic reflections relative to what is being studied (Janek, 2018). I used a journal to record thoughts before and after conducting interviews to mitigate

research biases. I also reduced or eliminated research bias by ensuring that relatives and colleagues within my current placement were not selected to participate in the study.

Methodology

Participate Selection Logic

For my planned research design, I sought to recruit seven to 10 Black female principals who lead or have led in a U.S. K-12 low-performing public school within the last 3 years. Moser and Korstjens (2018) suggested that the small sample size is based on several factors, the information richness of the data, the variety of participants, the broadness of the research questions and the phenomenon, the data collection method, and the type of sampling strategy. I selected a range of seven to 10 participants because I believed that I could reach saturation within this range. To determine proximity to saturation, researchers must evaluate the amount of in-depth data that shows patterns, categories, and variety of the phenomenon being studied to determine where they are in the process (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

I used purposive sampling to recruit participants using a combination of recruitment techniques that would attract the most study participants. Purposive sampling allowed me to use a wider geographic area to gather information about participant experiences (Ames et al., 2019). I recruited participants through social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook by sharing posts and flyers. Researchers can reach study participants by sharing information in groups on social media platforms where individuals within the group are members of the target population of the research (Marcus et al., 2017). Recruitment via social media platforms can help researchers recruit

more study participants in a shorter period (Leighton et al., 2021). Farrugia (2018) defined purposive sampling as a conceptual approach that allows the researcher to deliberately and purposely select the sample they believe will address the research questions. I focused on posting in groups that included Black female principals as members. Moser and Korstjens (2018) described purposive sampling as intentional and shared that participants contribute to the research by providing rich information about the studied topic. Black female principals leading low-performing schools know firsthand the barriers that impede school improvement. Within low-performing schools, Black female principals have experienced aspects of leadership that may not be common to all principals. Ames et al. (2019) stated that purposive sampling prompts the researcher to use their judgment that the population sample has relevant experiences and can add value to the study's outcome.

Ames et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of setting parameters for criteria for inclusion in the research study. Participants should be knowledgeable of the phenomenon being studied and be able to reflect on the experiences well enough to articulate meaning (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). To participant in this study, participants had to be Black female principals who currently lead or have led within the last 3 years in a K-12 public low-performing schools. Participants also had to reside in the United States but were not required to reside in a specific geographic area. Exclusion criteria included principals who lead in private schools, principals outside of the United States, and those who lead schools that are not considered low performing. I verified that prospective participants met the inclusion criteria prior to their participation in the interview process.

I created a social media post with wording that included details about the study to recruit the target population. Posts included a flyer with graphics that provide additional details about the study. Posts were shared in Facebook and LinkedIn groups at regular intervals where school principals were the target audience, with the addition of hashtags to engage individuals with the post. Hashtags used included #womeninschoolleadership, #lowperformingschools, #principalpreparation, #leadershipinlowperformingschools, and #blackfemaleprincipals. I also shared posts with verbiage and flyers with graphics on my personal Facebook and LinkedIn accounts with the same hashtags listed above. Leighton et al. (2021) shared that researchers can use the additional measure of posting on their personal social media accounts and ask their readers to forward the opportunity to participate in the study to potential participants. I viewed responses to social media posts and emails daily to ensure timely responses to prospective participants.

Prospective participants who met inclusion criteria received an email invitation from to participate in the study and a request to complete the informed consent. The informed consent covered essential details about the study, including criteria for participation, the purpose, sample questions, and maintaining confidentiality. Potential participants were asked to reply to the email with “I consent” to confirm their agreement to the study’s participation terms. Participants were also given the opportunity to consent verbally prior to starting the interview.

Instrumentation

Interviewing provides a way to gather information if the researcher cannot observe the participant in their environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interviews are

used to describe the meaning of central themes in participant experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). For this study, data were collected from interviews conducted via the online meeting platform Zoom.

I used a researcher-developed semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix A) to structure and organize the interview process. During the interview, participants answered open-ended questions that addressed the study's problem and purpose. I organized the discussion into parts that included critical themes from the Chapter 2 literature review: perceptions of the school context, current preparation and training, and policy suggestions for future preparation, training, and practice.

When conducting interviews, it is essential to consider the intersecting identities the participants bring into the discussion (Walton et al., 2022). Research shared by Walton et al. (2022) suggested that Black women who participate in qualitative interviews do not necessarily believe they are perceived correctly due to misrepresenting their experiences. Therefore, a focus was on ensuring that participants felt comfortable given their intersecting identities. Researchers must be mindful of their personalities and how to create a space where conversations can happen (Yoom & Uliassi, 2022). As a part of the interview process, I disclosed that I am an educator and a former principal. The goal was to build trust between the research participant and myself as the researcher/interviewer to help participants to feel more comfortable with the process. To build on this level of trust, I used the validation techniques Walton et al. (2022) suggested, to help participants feel comfortable during the interview. Validation allows space for the researcher to validate the meaning of the participant's experiences while

signaling that they are experts in their experiences in the world around them (Walton et al., 2022). I used positive words of validation and affirmation while asking participants to elaborate on a particular activity or event related to the study topic. The interview process continued until saturation. Saturation occurs when interviews do not yield new information that aligns with the study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Participants received a \$20 electronic gift card via email for their participation in the study.

Data Collection

I used an iterative sampling approach to acquire rich data (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Data were collected via Zoom at the time and day agreed on by the researcher and study participants. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached, with an ideal participation of seven to 10 participants. The study yielded significant study results from the selected participants.

I utilized a researcher-created document (see Appendix B) to record additional information during the interview and to capture important observations. Participant interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording feature as the primary device. Zoom recordings were downloaded and stored using a password for review throughout the study. I used the recording feature on my cell phone as a secondary recording device. I also took notes throughout the interview to note relevant participant responses and findings. In his research, Zavattaro (2021) used handwritten notes to note patterns as they emerged throughout the interview. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stressed the importance of taking handwritten notes and recording the interview so that the research process can continue if there is damage to the recording.

Data Analysis Plan

Elliot (2018) shared that coding allows the researcher to break down the data to determine the meaning and then put it together meaningfully. I used a combination of resources to analyze data. I used Bryman's four stages of coding as a resource, which included looking for ideas within the data, identifying codes, creating a schema, coding the transcript, and determining the relationship to existing theories or ideas (Carpendale et al., 2017). In addition to manual coding, I used Delve coding software to analyze data electronically (Ho & Limpaecher, n.d.)

After collecting the data through Zoom interviews, I determined the focus of the coding. This was done by reading through the data, in this case, interview transcripts (Carpendale et al., 2017). The researcher should consider doing this without taking notes or stopping to reflect. The goal is to allow the codes to emerge independently (Carpendale et al., 2017). A first read will give the researcher an impression of what it is about. At this point, the researcher will focus on identifying themes. After reviewing the interview transcripts, I took note of ideas leading up to the data analysis process and determine possible themes (Carpendale et al., 2017).

The next step in the data analysis is identifying codes and creating a schema (Carpendale et al., 2017). During this step, I re-read each interview transcript and analyzed the text by color-coding responses that related to RQ1 and those that aligned with RQ2. In addition to highlighting, I notated possible codes in the margins of the transcript. Carpendale et al., (2017) clarified this as a way to identify a group of factors that were definable, recognizable, and of interest to the research questions.

Coding is the third step in Byrman's four-step data analysis plan. With coding, the researcher takes the identified and defined factors from identifying the codes and proceeds through the transcript marking or coding each occurrence of each element identified and pre-defined in stage two (Carpendale et al., 2017). After going through the transcripts, I eliminated any repetition of codes and then incorporated a strategy called preliminary jotting, as suggested by Saldana (2016). This technique analyzed data in a three-column format with raw, preliminary, and final codes. I used a similar researcher-developed three-column coding chart for each study participant (see Appendix C) for RQ1 and a separate coding chart for RQ2 for each participant (see Appendix D). This process continues as the researcher collects and formats the data (Saldana, 2016). After continuously reviewing interview transcripts, I selected responses that align with each research question, placed them in column one, and assigned a number to each respective chart. Saldana (2016) shared that column two aligns preliminary codes to the raw data based on early interpretation of responses. In Column 2 of the coding chart, I included preliminary codes based on each piece of raw data which will be a continuous process while reviewing the transcript.

The fourth and final step is to determine relevance (Carpendale et al., 2017). After compiling all the data and labeling, I evaluated if connections could be made to existing theories and perspectives. With Saldana's (2016) preliminary jotting technique, the final column can be completed as all data is reviewed and transcribed and solidify final codes with the same number assigned to each raw data item in Column 1. During this final stage of the data analysis plan, I compiled the relevant raw data and codes for each

participant and research questions on the researcher-developed document (see Appendices E and F). This document helped solidify the common thoughts of research participants, leading to themes and overall connection to the literature and the study. Following this process, I compiled all the information for the study's discussion section. All data related to the study will be password protected and destroyed after five years.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research presents information that is viewed as credible to the reader. It is another way of ensuring a high-quality study (Nyirenda et al., 2020). Stahl and King (2020) define trustworthiness in qualitative research as a shared reality among consumers of the qualitative research process. I incorporated journaling to record my reflections on the research process. During the data analysis portion of the research, coding was used to interpret participant responses. As used in research by Mishra and Dey (2022), themes were identified to help determine common patterns that emerge from the data. Trustworthiness was addressed further by focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures.

Credibility

Many factors must be considered to ensure the credibility of a study. Nyirenda et al. (2020) related credibility to internal validity, focusing on how valid the study results are to the reality being studied. It relies on individual judgments and perceptions of the consumer that the ideas presented in the research should share a relationship (Stahl & King, 2020). Since the data collected from the study must reflect the research participants' perceptions, I used the recorded participant interviews and verbatim

transcripts to verify my findings while analyzing responses (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I also captured accurate data using interview transcripts and coding sheets as supporting documents to ensure the study's validity (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether the results of this study can be used in other contexts and time frames (Nyirenda et al., 2020). It refers to how well the analysis of the study fits into a context other than the one studied. Stahl and King (2020) shared that transfer is possible when the researcher provides thick descriptions that merely suggest opportunities for future research. To support possible future research, I described research participants and the process of identifying and selecting them for the study. I also provided details on the data collection setting, how participants were recruited, the data collection method, and the results. If detailed information is included, the study will likely be replicable and transferable (Stahl & King, 2020)

Dependability

Dependability is also called reliability (Nyirenda et al., 2020). Dependability focuses on the role of the researcher. This role includes a careful transcription of the research component, a description of the research design, details of the data collection procedure, and reporting any known errors of the research and changes through journaling. Dependability, described by Stahl and King (2020), is an opportunity for both the researcher and the consumer to build trust in the events unfolding throughout the research process. As a part of the research, I focused on explaining all aspects of the data collection, including interviews, the coding process, and themes.

Confirmability

Confirmability focuses on findings being free from bias when the researcher provides insight into the role they play as a researcher in the process (Nyirenda et al., 2020). The goal is to ensure the neutrality of the researcher. Stahl and King (2020) shared that confirmability is getting close to objective reality as possible. I achieved this by guaranteeing a careful review of all aspects of the research to ensure alignment with the findings. I maintained reflexivity, which is consideration and acknowledgment of how one's beliefs and experiences can influence components of the research process. Shufutinsky (2020) shared that reflexivity challenges the researcher to examine their beliefs and how their perceptions of the world around them affect their relationship with the study. The bracketing method can also mitigate the effects of preconceptions that could discredit the research (Shufutinsky, 2020). I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process to bracket and keep myself separate from the research. Self-reflexivity is a process that brings awareness of the researcher's impact on the study participants (Martin-Cuellar, A., 2018). This can include the beliefs, perceptions, and experiences of the researcher. As a part of reflexivity, I must know myself in the context of the research while at the same time keeping my perceptions and beliefs separate from the research. In this process, I incorporated self-monitoring to ensure separation. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the design and conducting of the research study.

Ethical Procedure

This study explored and gave voice to the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools so that educational and political leaders can understand

what is needed for principal preparation programs amid an education system consumed by complexity, particularly within underserved communities. Being in this study involved some risk of minor discomforts encountered in daily life. This could include things such as sharing sensitive information that may trigger emotions while recalling stressful situations and responding to questions that remind participants of disparities in and around their work environment. However, with these protections in place, this study posed minimal risk to participants' well-being. Participants were informed in advance that they could pause or end the interview at any time if they felt unable to continue.

This study offered no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of the study was to benefit society by understanding the experiences of Black female principals who lead low-performing schools. This study gave voice to the limitations experienced by these school principals and provided context for enhancing principal preparation, support, and resource provision. School districts, state education officials, and policymakers should use the findings of this study to impact legislative decisions regarding equity in our schools. Benefits of participating in the study included giving Black female principals a voice in legislative decisions surrounding preparation programs, improvement in content offered in principal preparation programs to address the challenges of leadership in low performing schools and improved outcomes for minority students attending low-performing schools due to more focused preparation of leaders.

All information regarding ethical procedures were included in the informed consent form shared with prospective participants. The informed consent form was

emailed and prompted study participants to reply with the words “I consent” if they wanted to move forward with participating in the study. I made the informed consent available before the interview to allow participants to consent verbally if a written consent was not obtained prior to. Potential participants were provided with my Walden email address in the event that they had any questions before consenting to participate.

As the researcher, I took measures to protect the privacy of study participants by ensuring that their information is kept strictly confidential within the limits of the law and assured that it would not be communicated outside of this research study. Risks associated with the livelihood of participants were alleviated by protecting participants’ confidential data from disclosure. Gender, ethnicity, and the number of years were inclusion criteria for the study; however, this information will also be kept confidential. Results of the study will not include the names of participants or any other identifiable information. All information will be stored in a database using codes so that no one can determine who participated in the study. The identity and contact information of participants may only be shared with Walden University supervisors. The study’s final results will be shared in general terms without disclosing participant names, school districts, or schools to reduce potential risks. General geographic regions within the United States may be included, but specific cities of residence will not be a part of the results that will be shared. Protections in place against legal risks include protecting confidential or identifiable information of participants if there is a forced disclosure for a legal matter.

I obtained permission from the Walden University IRB to conduct the study. To ensure the integrity of the study, I followed the IRB guidelines to protect human participants. Approval number 08-24-23-1008521, was assigned granting permission to begin the study and collect data is. Research participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and that participation in the study is not required even after consent. Participants were informed that they were free to discontinue participation in the study at any time without penalty. Any psychological risks of associated with participation in this study were reduced by reminding research participants of their rights to withdraw from participating if they become uncomfortable.

Regarding recruitment of study participants, I posted flyers to various social media sites to reach Black female principals of low-performing schools to recruit seven to 10 study volunteers. The flyer asked prospective participants to contact the researcher by email to volunteer to participate. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria were eligible to participate in the study regardless of whether they are considered vulnerable populations to ensure that their perspectives were included. Recruitment was done by purposive sampling. To reduce additional ethical concerns, I did not recruit individuals whom I have supervised to participate in the study. Study participants may include co-workers, friends, or family members of individuals that I know. As the consent form mentions, information will be kept strictly confidential.

Data was collected through 60-minute participant interviews via Zoom. Participants received the following information regarding the interview:

- Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer.

- Everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not.
- If you decide to join the study now, you can change your mind later.
- You may stop at any time.
- Participants who do not consent to the recording of the interview will be disqualified from participation in the study.

I kept the data secure by using a password to protect logins when accessing study data, assigning codes in place of names, and storing names separately from the data collected in the study. Additional protection included the following:

- Names of participants were obtained due to the need to verify that inclusion criteria were met via public school websites.
- Numbers were assigned to each participant's name.
- Codes and names of participants were stored by password separately.

The data will be kept safe for at least five years and discarded in the following manner after the five-year mark: Participant information such as names, research data, interview sessions and audio recording are mandated to be stored for five years and destroyed thereafter with a designated shredder.

- Paper documents will be shredded.
- Information stored on the computer hard drive will be deleted.
- Information stored on removable drives will be deleted and overwritten.
- Handheld audio recordings will be deleted and discarded.

Summary

This chapter described the qualitative research design and the rationale for choosing this approach. It provided information on the generic qualitative research method, including the participant selection process, sampling procedure, and data collection instruments and procedures for data analysis. This chapter highlighted the purpose of the study, the research question, and its alignment with the open-ended interview as the primary data collection method. I also explained my role as the researcher and emphasized the strategies for addressing research bias, ethical concern, and trustworthiness.

Principals of low-performing schools are expected to make significant changes within high-stakes accountability systems within a short period. Black female principals face unique challenges within the context of their communities. This qualitative study focused on understanding the experiences of Black female principals who lead or have led within the last 3 years in a U.S. K-12 public low-performing school. Information gathered will inform decisions made on the preparation and training they need to lead amid systematic barriers deeply rooted in underserved communities.

By describing and discussing the issues mentioned above, in this chapter, I provided a detailed explanation of how I investigated and understood the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools. The study generated sufficient data to answer the research questions, thereby understanding what preparation and training Black female principals believe is necessary to improve low-performing schools.

In Chapter 4, I will provide details of the study's results, data collection, and analysis, including tables to represent findings. I will also discuss my interview experience, data collection and coding, evidence of trustworthiness, and research ethics.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study aimed to explore and give voice to the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools so that educational and political leaders can understand what they need in principal preparation programs amid an education system consumed by complexity, particularly within underserved communities. The research focused on what preparation and support Black female principals believe they needed to lead improvement in low-performing schools. This chapter describes the participants' setting and demographic profile, followed by the data collection procedures, a summary of participant responses and a description of the data analysis and steps taken to enhance trustworthiness.

Setting

I conducted the study without deviation from the stated setting in Chapter 3. Study participants resided in four of the five regions of the United States (Southwest, Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast). I conducted each participant interview via the Zoom platform according to the day and time agreed upon by myself and the participant. On average, each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. No personal or organizational conditions influenced participants or their experience during the study.

Demographics

All participants met the inclusion criteria for participation in the study. Participants could share their experiences as Black female principals leading low-performing schools because they previously led or currently lead in low-performing

schools. Participants shared similar cultures and experiences related to leadership within a low-performing school. All seven participants were female, and all identified as Black or African American and previously or currently served as principals in low-performing schools in public school districts. Table 1 provides information on study participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Demographic category	Elementary	Middle	High
School level	5	1	1
Years of principal experience			
Under 5 years	3	1	
5–10 years	1		1
10–20 years	1		
Years as principal in a low-performing school			
1st school	3		
2nd school	3		
4th school			1
Region			
North			1
Southwest	2		
Midwest	1		
Southeast	2	1	
Number of students			
100–399	2		
250–499	1		
500 or more	2	1	1
Race/ethnicity of students			
50% African American and 50% Hispanic	2		
Predominantly African American	3	1	
Mixed races			1

Data Collection

Recruitment proceeded as outlined in Chapter 3, with one variation. I began an interview with the first prospective participant; however, the individual did not want to turn on their camera, and after the first question, it appeared that the individual did not

seem to have any relevant connection or experience to the research study, so I ended the interview. Following this event, approximately six other inquiries were received via email, and all appeared connected to the first prospective participant. In response to these inquiries of potential participants who seemingly had no connection to the topic of the study, I requested that they, and future potential participants, confirm that they met the inclusion criteria and provide additional information, such as the name of their school and school district for verification. As a result, I could ensure that participants met the inclusion criteria from their responses by visiting their school or school district website. Once I verified this information, I sent a link to schedule the Zoom interview. Implementing this process helped data collection go a lot smoother.

Ultimately, seven Black female principals participated in this study. The data collection process lasted from September 7 to December 9, 2023. I conducted interviews via the Zoom platform, each of which lasted approximately 60 minutes. I audio-recorded interview data using the Zoom feature and a secondary recording device. Staying consistent with the methods in Chapter 3, I stored the recorded interviews and any notes taken during the interview process on a password-protected device. I will keep these items stored for 5 years. During the data collection process, I also used a Word document to make notations as participants responded to the interview questions, mentally connecting responses to codes discovered in previous interviews.

Data Analysis

As presented in Chapter 3, I incorporated Bryman's four stages of coding as a guide to analyzing study data. I followed the process below for each participant interview:

Step 1: Looking for Ideas Within the Data

I first replayed each recorded interview, listening for initial ideas of the coding focus and discovering significant themes that might emerge later. Then, I transcribed participant responses (see Appendix G) to each interview question and read through each text to gather a general impression.

Step 2: Identifying Codes and Creating a Schema

Relying on open coding, I began to analyze the written transcripts and notate preliminary codes by placing notes in the margins of the text. I also used in vivo coding to highlight relevant participant words or phrases aligned with the research questions. I then organized this first round of codes in a spreadsheet format.

Step 3: Coding the Transcript

In this step, I read through each transcript again and began marking the occurrence of each code identified in Step 2. This iterative process allowed me to discover open and axial codes (see Appendix I) which I had not previously identified, prompting an additional review of the transcript to ensure no other codes were missing. I added the new codes to the spreadsheet and organized them with the previous codes, evaluating any code similarities or differences and updating the spreadsheet accordingly. Themes emerged through an iterative coding process, beginning with coding and then

moving to categories and themes followed by subthemes. Through the process of coding and frequency analysis, the codes were grouped into categories, themes, and subthemes (see Appendix H). First, categories were determined after the coding process. Four themes then began to emerge through the ongoing review of the data, followed by subthemes which were derived to provide additional context and understanding of the overall themes of the study.

Step 4: Determining the Relevance

The purpose of this stage was to relate the themes to existing theories or ideas. Using the information from Chapter 2, the results of this study are placed in context in Chapter 5.

Results

The results of this study answered the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do Black female principals describe the essential components of preparation, training, and support needed to manage complexities in low-performing schools?
- RQ2: How can the experiences of Black female principals of low-performing schools inform policies and programs to support them in leading improvement efforts successfully?

This section organizes the study's results by theme and subsequent subthemes (see Table 2) and aligns to the two research questions above.

Table 2*Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subthemes
1. One size doesn't fit all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership communication & advocacy • Supporting teacher growth and development • Self-care • Facilitating cultural competence
2. Extra challenges require extra resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide supervisory support and mentoring • Invest in meaningful and targeted principal training programs focused on practical skills needed for low-performing schools. • Match the strongest teachers/staff with the schools in greatest need. • Provide more resources to train and mentor new teachers. • Provide up-to-date and consistent curriculum and materials
3. Accountability without autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on Accountability and testing. • District requirements (strict practices) • State requirements (unreasonable requirements)
4. More complex challenges serve as barriers to improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges with classroom management • Challenges within the community

Theme 1: One Size Doesn't Fit All

In reference to the preparation and support of Black female principals leading low-performing schools, responses from participants in the study suggested that the one-size-fits-all approach does not always work. Study participants recommended that the following components be added to preparation programs: (a) leadership communication and advocacy, (b) supporting teacher growth and development, (c) self-care for stress, and (d) facilitating cultural competence.

Leadership Communication and Advocacy

Study participants believe that despite challenges in low-performing schools, effective communication is critical in facilitating an environment where improvement can occur. Communication specific to advocacy efforts was evident in participant responses, especially when they could articulate the needs of their schools at various levels. P-6 highlighted the importance of communicating effectively and professionally outside the school building: “But they [principals] also need to know how to talk to the school board. They need to know how to talk to them because it’s different. Stakeholders call for different kinds of things, and principals don’t always know that.”

Principals also agreed that fostering relationships through effective communication is necessary to facilitate improvement. Four of seven principals discussed the importance of building relationships with staff, students, parents, and the community. P-4 shared that the success or failure of progress is deeply rooted in relationships, stating: “You have to build relationships with people.” P-5 shared insight on building relationships with staff and how this process takes time to evolve, adding: “I had to build that relationship, and over time, some I won over and some I did not.” P-3 shared, “If they [teachers] don’t have those good relationships, they will struggle. The kids are not going to respect them.” Participants noted that principals need more training to help teachers and staff create and sustain relationships.

Supporting Teacher Growth and Development

All seven study participants shared that teacher support was a priority. Principals need first to determine how teachers want and need to be supported before they can

adequately guide them through the growth and development process. P-5 shared that she noticed teachers experienced problems with classroom management, frustration with instructional implementation, and inconsistency in following expectations. This impacted the campus climate and culture. P-5 attributed this to teachers not feeling supported, sharing: “And so there’s this misalignment in, well, what is your support language? Because everybody’s support language is different.” P-5 used the term *support language* to imply that teachers had different ways in which they preferred to be supported.

This subtheme was further supported by participants’ descriptions of successful tools they used for teacher development through classroom observations and coaching. P-7 shared the importance of implementing an effective coaching cycle to help teachers improve their teaching practices: “We had a tool called instructional rounds, and we would use this Google form to document what we saw, what we heard, and to ensure that their [teacher] lessons were aligned to the standards.” P-7 added that the campus leadership team would share the feedback and then follow up in person to discuss. This coaching cycle was repeated as often as needed to support the teacher’s growth. P-5 cited a similar process of observing all teachers, looking for evidence of learning, and providing effective feedback. Adding further context to the importance of teacher development, P-4 cited how she used professional learning to coach and develop teachers. She shared that she would follow up with a classroom observation after a professional learning session to see if teachers implemented what they had learned. Through an effective coaching cycle, principals in this study emphasized the teacher

growth and development process and its importance in building capacity within their teaching staff.

Self-Care for Stress

Study participants described their experiences leading low-performing schools as stressful and overwhelming, highlighting the importance of self-care as they performed their leadership duties. P-6 attributed work-related stress to the realization that she needed to take better care of herself: “They [Black female principals] also need to know that as amazing and wonderful as they are, they can be replaced. That it’s not worth your health and it’s not worth your family.” P-7 shared that she came to terms of how importance self-care is after the fact: “I think what would have really helped me was the self-care piece with the stress level because I really feel like I had to be the one to do all the work in that school.” Comments from P-2 added context to limitations: “And I think that would be really beneficial as a female leader to know that it’s okay to take care of yourself because to lead well, you have to be well.”

As shown in Table 3, the Black female principals in this study reiterated that the stress and overwhelming demands of the job can cause a strain on the mental and emotional health of the principal.

Table 3*Open Codes and Related Participant Responses*

Open codes	Sample participant responses
Lonely/isolating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • But as a principal still, it can be very isolating (P-4) • Being a principal is very lonely (P-5) • This role is lonely, especially at a low-performing school (P-7)
Urgency/pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition, too it's all is the pressure that goes along with it (P-1) • It's almost like you have to accelerate the learning because in 9 months, you have to come off this list (P-1) • We feel like we aren't good enough, or we operate in fear (P-2) • Everything is urgent (P-4) • The pressure that I have on myself and for my school is more than what the district has given me (P-5) • I hear a lot of Black female principals struggle with imposter syndrome (P-5) • We had check-ins every week to measure how well we [the school] were doing academically (P-7) • I felt like I had to be the one doing all the work, being the superhero, making the scores grow overnight (P-7)

Note. Description of open codes and sample participant responses related to self-care.

All seven principals used words like *frustration*, *overwhelm*, *stress*, *urgency*, and *pressure* to explain how they experienced the work in their challenging roles. P-4 emphasized, “Everything is a priority. Everything is urgent. Everything is on your plate. There is no downtime.” P-2 discussed the urgency of the work, recalling the pressure she felt to make targeted improvements within nine months: “You have to think so rapidly, and everything is moving so fast.”

Participants also shared frustration with having to answer to many different people, including their immediate supervisors, district leaders, and state officials. Consistent check-ins were an added stressor for P-7, who shared: “We had check-ins every week to measure how well we were doing academically.” P-5 shared the added

pressure she placed on herself to meet campus goals, saying, “The pressure that I have on myself and for my school is more than what the district has given me.”

Due to the stress of leading a low-performing school, study participants emphasized that Black female principals leading low-performing schools would benefit from learning practical solutions for prioritizing self-care needs. Participants shared a few self-care activities that they tried to incorporate into their routines. P-6 shared, “I went to a chiropractor, and they helped my body. They helped me. They helped teach me how to listen to what my \body was saying and that has helped me more than anything. P-2 added, “And also, to put your stuff up and start over again the next day.” P-3 voiced how Black female principals can use affirmations as confirmation of their ability to lead in this context:

Because sometimes you feel like you’re on this island. You’re the only one out there and you’re trying to make a difference and you’re trying to do the work but sometimes you don’t feel as appreciated. So, writing yourself a note at the beginning of the year telling yourself. “So, you know things are going to get tough you know, Hold your head up. You’re doing a great job.” You know, you’re giving yourself some affirmation so that you can go back and reread that and help yourself because there will be times when you get really frustrated and really down on yourself and you’re thinking ok. I’m trying.

Responses from participants solidified their strong belief about the importance of self-care and working in the challenging environment of a low performing school.

Facilitating Cultural Competence

Four of seven study participants stressed that knowledge of areas in which cultural sensitivity exists and strategies to facilitate a culturally sensitive environment should be part of principal preparation programs. P-3 shared that some teachers judge based on circumstances beyond the student's control, "I had a teacher the other day. She was saying this child is always coming to school late, and I said, is that her fault?" P-6 added that teachers struggled to connect with the students they served, "I have seen some teachers not be able to relate to students."

Principals cited that lack of awareness can cause tensions between staff and students of varying backgrounds. Knowing how to create opportunities for teachers to learn how students from different cultures engage with the learning environment is essential. P-3 emphasized that principals should not only know the population that they serve but understand the experience of the students that they serve ahead of time, saying:

Coming from a county school to an urban setting and never have I taught in an urban setting. I wish I had known more about it before I went in. Not that I didn't know it was a city school, but I wasn't familiar with the school. I did not know the demographics. I did not know that there were shootings in the neighborhoods all the time.

P-6 explained that students in her school didn't see things like reading as a priority because they may not have seen it reflected in their homes due to family structure and status, "That's another thing, different understandings of what success looks like." P-6 commented on how students could quickly determine that school is not essential because

parents allowed students to quit and work instead. When principals can help teachers understand how students of different cultures engage in the learning environment, they can help facilitate a more positive teacher-student exchange in the classroom.

Theme 2: Extra Challenges, Require Extra Resources

Study participants highlighted several challenges that they encountered while leading their schools. They believed these challenges prompted the need for additional support in the following areas: (a) provide supervisory support and mentoring, (b) invest in meaningful and targeted principal training programs focused on practical skills needed for low-performing schools, (c) match the strongest teachers/staff with the schools in greatest need provide more resources to train and mentor new teachers, (d) provide up-to-date and consistent curriculum and materials, and (e) develop stronger policies on equity and biases surrounding race and gender.

Provide Supervisory Support and Mentoring

In terms of supervisory support, five of seven participants expressed concern with the level of support that they received from their direct supervisors. Participants voiced that they received support primarily connected to test scores and accountability. P-1 spoke passionately of only seeing her supervisor when the results from the campus assessments did not meet the desired targets:

Don't come at the ninth and the 12th hour when something is going wrong, or the data is not looking up to par. Why wasn't the support there from the beginning? It's always we're a day late and a dollar short. We're running always to catch up

and to point a finger with the blame. When you tell me we're partners in education, and we're there for each other, where were you when I needed you?!

Comments from P-7 further supported this subtheme:

It was always about whether you are making improvement. It was always about how I noticed that your students in this subgroup are not growing as quickly as this subgroup. But not one time did they ask how you are doing.

P-5 said she struggled with miscommunication regarding supervisory support citing that the support she needed is not what she received, "So there was a disconnect in terms of I'm telling you what I need for support." P-7 emphasized how the supervisory support added more work to the already overwhelming role of the principalship by consistently responding to questions and concerns from supervisors, which is what they deemed as support. P-7 showed strong emotions when sharing the constant check ins from her supervisor, "What are you doing now? I noticed you haven't been in classrooms. What are you doing now? And I'm thinking, can I be a principal, please?!" P-1 offered that supervisors should be mindful that the 'support is not supporting but pushing more work onto you which is heavy, but nothing is being lifted.'

On the contrary, 5 of 7 principals believed they needed more support aligned to their specific roles and responsibilities for managing all facets of the principal role. P-2 suggested that supervisors should internalize the time it takes to grow a school:

It doesn't happen overnight, and the district has to understand that it takes time. But if you kind of work with that person and step out of the way and let them do what they need to do for that school, I think you're going to have a better result.

P-1 shared that the magnitude of the work was a cause for concern for the well-being of the principal while doing challenging work for school improvement. P-2 proposed, “Can we get someone to come in and prepare to present a professional development or help with the heavy lifting?” P-3 added that principals need a better support system, “You should be able to reach out to them for questions and comments and ideas. But it was strictly business.” Principals also shared that they wanted their supervisors to be less evaluative of their work and more focused on coaching them as they made crucial decisions.

P-2 shared:

Also, leadership, like on the leadership side, though we need thought partners, we need lifelines, not just, you know, checking in. You really need to check in, like have someone to come in to think through different things, because there’s a lot that is involved with a low-performing school especially if you are dealing with new teachers as well. So we don’t need someone just to come in to say hey, how’s it going.

P-5 spoke specifically:

Come to my school, walk with me. Let’s calibrate our observations. You know, asking me questions like how would you coach this teacher? What support would you use as an instructional leader?

P-7 also mentioned that the supervisor needed to care about the well-being of the principal “But not one time did they ask how you are doing?”

Six of seven participants agreed that mentorship is a much-needed support for Black female principals leading low-performing schools. P-7 shared that a mentor could be not only professional support but personal support as well. P-4 added, “You just need someone else that you can communicate with. You need like a safe place to talk to someone about just the daily struggles with children, with parents.” P-2 referred to the need for thought partners and lifelines to do the work of improving schools. P-4 agreed but added that the mentor must have worked in a low-performing school to familiarize them with the daily challenges and workload principals face. P-3 added comments about how mentor relationships can be supportive, “Sometimes you need someone to be able to bounce ideas off of, and it can’t always just be somebody in your building.”

Invest in Meaningful and Targeted Principal Training Programs Focused on Practical Skills Needed for Low-Performing Schools

All seven principals shared frustration and dissatisfaction with the training that had or had not been provided by their school districts. P-1 noted that due to improvements made on their campus the previous year, the support level of the district decreased, and the principals did not receive the much-needed training to continue school improvement efforts successfully. In reference to training before taking on the role at a low-performing school, P-2 shared, “And also, I think there should be some type of preparation before you go into these types of low-performing campuses maybe so that you really know what you’re getting yourself into.” On the contrary, P-5 shared, “Honestly, we haven’t received any training.” Not only did principals share that they did not receive training before taking on the principal role at a low-performing school, but

they also shared that their teachers expressed dissatisfaction with teacher training provided by the district.

Five of seven principals discussed problems with the support of new principals. P-2 shared criticism for districts that place new principals in low-performing schools. “Because to be honest, I think it’s definitely not a place for a new principal.” Others disclosed their experiences and how training could have helped them better navigate their roles.” P-5 shared, “I was a new principal. I didn’t know what I didn’t know.” P-7 shared, “Being a new principal, I wanted to please everybody, so I would stop my observations to address whatever came up.” P-2 further clarified that being a new principal in this context requires a more experienced individual to oversee the significant operations of this school context.

Of the seven principals, three believed district partnerships could enhance training and support. P-5 shared her experience with a collaboration between the district and a local university that prepared assistant principals for the principalship role. Participants participated in monthly sessions in addition to coaching with tools to promote effective leadership. P-5 also shared details about the support she received while interning during the program, “What helped was that the person came out to your school, walked your school with you, and did observations with you.” P-7 provided additional insight on a district partnership with a local university for newly appointed administrators, through which participants met monthly and discussed helpful leadership topics in their role as leaders. Participant P-4 added that viewing school leadership from a systems perspective was the biggest takeaway from another district partnership. P-4 also shared the benefit of

having facilitators familiar with the work and how it impacted their thoughts about leadership. P-6 shared,

I think as a Black female principal actually as any kind of any female principal, but especially as a Black female principal, you need to ... be able to come into work centered enough. That you're able to put a little distance a little objectivity between you and really, whatever it is.

Match the Strongest Teachers/Staff with the Schools in Greatest Need

Six of the seven participants cited that staffing needs were a significant concern, adding another layer of complexity to their work. Study participants voiced their concern specifically for teachers and their capacity to effectively meet the academic needs of students despite their experience level. P-1 shared her concern for the mismatch in allocations of proficient teachers in content areas: "You don't get the staff you need to level the playing field. P-4 shared a similar issue with teacher placement within her district: "The weakest teachers teaching in the weakest schools doesn't make sense."

Study participants also noted additional concerns with staffing in low-performing schools. P-3 highlighted the challenges with the overall shortage of teachers, which led the school district to hire individuals without a completed degree or teaching certificate. P-2 added a notable disparity with teacher placement, citing that in her district, existing teachers at low-performing schools don't get the additional stipends that teachers at higher-performing schools receive. P-3 expressed a valid concern that not all teachers would remain in their appointed teaching positions for the school year due to their experience level and the error in their perception of the totality of the role. These concerns highlight

the more significant issue shared by study participants: schools are not staffed with the right teachers for the low-performing school setting.

Provide More Resources to Train and Mentor New Teachers

Of the seven principals in the study, six shared that tending to the needs of new teachers occupied a lot of time. Principals struggled to get new teachers on board who were committed to the work required in a low-performing school setting. P-2 shared, “I’m having to coach up brand new teachers. Like over half of the staff is like new teachers.” P-4 added context with comments about her new teaching staff: “A lot of these teachers are coming in young; they’re coming in non-traditional.” P-1 shared challenges for new teachers in her district who were required to complete additional professional training hours and work towards their certification. P-6 reflected on the perceptions shared by new teachers, citing that the work was not anything like they thought it was going to be. These occurrences from principal responses highlight the need for more support for new teachers. Low-performing schools experience high levels of complexity, and even though new teachers require a lot of support, low-performing schools are filled with them, creating additional pressure on leadership.

Provide Up-to-Date and Consistent Curriculum and Materials

All seven participants shared that their focus centered on instruction and the resources to support it. P-6 asked, “Why is it that the overwhelming majority of underperforming schools do not have an articulated curriculum?” P-2 expressed frustration with having a curriculum but not receiving the resources on time: “Also, ensuring that we have all our curriculum and textbooks on time. In a low-performing

campus, we don't have any time to waste." P-3 shared frustration with department communication regarding what to do specifically with a shift in instructional practices: "We still have not been told what exactly they want us to do to address reading instruction."

Study participants also gave context for more autonomy for principals to change the curriculum to meet the needs of their students. P-4 shared that instruction needed to not necessarily be delivered but managed, signaling the need for teachers to adjust and meet the needs of students. P-2 shared that Tier 1 instruction was the daily priority. Students struggled with low reading levels, requiring a focused curriculum. P-2 shared that getting access to textbooks needed for instruction was a challenge: "We don't have time to look for materials; they need to be delivered on time." P-3 shared, "I feel like we are always working behind the eight ball." While ensuring they were working towards campus, district, and state goals, study participants emphasized challenges with meeting school improvement goals with problems with curriculum materials.

Stronger Policies on Equity and Biases Surrounding Race and Gender

Study participants believe that district leaders choose Black female principals to lead low-performing schools because they know how to engage the student population and the community surrounding the school. P-2 shared her opinion of why district leaders choose Black women for the role: "I've seen so many times that the African American females step in to clean up the job that has been done, and one thing about it is that it doesn't happen overnight."

On the contrary, even though Black female principals seem to be sought out in some respects for these roles, the principals in the study unanimously believed that the support is insufficient for the required work. Black female principals in the study agreed that while they were placed in these positions to manage higher levels of complexity, they were not treated the same as principals of other races and genders in higher-performing schools.

After entering their leadership roles, principals in the study cited that they experienced bias related to race and gender. P-5 described race issues she faced when taking over as principal in a school with a majority White staff previously led by a White principal: “At my school, when I first got there, I felt like people treated me like I didn’t know anything.” P-5 added,

So, there’s a lot of intersectionality. And I couldn’t tell if it was because I was a woman. If it was because I’m Black. If it was because I was Black and a woman. I couldn’t tell. But you experienced so much covert racism. These microaggressions ... and you’ve got to take the high road. People will treat you like you don’t know nothing, and you just gotta smile to their face.

P-6 shared how she perceived that higher-ups did not listen to her:

It’s not that I can’t command a room or whatnot, but I think that there is a certain level of ... in some ways, I have felt like I was just one of the teachers. You, teachers, superintendents, and whatnot, they do not listen to teachers.

P-1 shared how Black female principals are perceived as angry Black women but are put in these positions because they are also perceived to be able to handle people of their own

culture. P-7 also shared the same stigma, “But being a Black woman principal already, you know, there’s a stigma of being the angry Black woman. And so there was never a time where I was speaking firmly, firmly would be seen as, oh, she’s mad.” P-5 “I could feel when people’s energy. People are not being authentic.” P-5 added, “I have felt that as a Black female principal.” On the contrary, P-4 was not necessarily able to determine if the treatment she experienced was due to her race: “I think it’s just what happens as a principal, and I don’t know if it’s being a Black female or what, but the principalship can be very isolating.”

Black female principals in this study perceived that their race and gender were barriers to receiving the support and resources that they needed to make the expected improvements within their schools. P-2 shared her perspective on asking for help: “I think you can’t be afraid of asking for what you need. That’s number one because sometimes, like I said, Black females are so afraid of losing their job if they speak up and ask for the things they need.” P-1 shared that she didn’t believe her campus would get the support it needed because she was a Black female principal: P-2 reiterated her perspective, “I think we missed the mark with that because as an African American female leading low-performing schools, you can’t do all the work by yourself. You’re going to have to have a good team.”

Study participants also shared similar perspectives about the career trajectory of Black female principals after leaving the principalship. Results showed that principals believed opportunities outside of low-performing schools are not easily attainable for Black female principals. P-2 shared that they keep Black females in certain positions due

to need: “They may say, if they’re good at turning around low-performing schools and taming the parents and the kids, then why do we want to push them up.” P-2 also commented on her belief: “If you can turn around a low-performing school, you can write your ticket at other places.” On the contrary, people may decide not to promote them because they are afraid that due to their extensive experience in turning around a low-performing school, the Black female principal may take their job.

For the Black female principals in the study, leading a low-performing school brings unwanted consequences. P-6 boldly stated, “For some reason, this profession and this system eats Black female principals alive.” It is the perception of the Black female principals in the study that due to the inequities within school systems, they do not receive all of the resources and support they need to be successful in their roles, thereby increasing the risk of the school not being able to progress out of their low-performing status. These beliefs are consistent with the sentiments of P-6: “As amazing and wonderful as they are, they can be replaced.” P-7 shared,

It’s lonely, especially at a low-performing school. It’s almost like you have this scarlet letter on your chest when you go to leadership [meetings] and you know, well, [high] performing principals kind of sit together and like, oh, that’s the bad table over there. It’s lonely. It’s lonely, and nobody wants to be in that scene.

P-6 shared,

I think as a Black female principal, actually as any kind of female principal, but especially as a Black female principal, you need to, um, you need to be able to

come into work centered enough that you're able to put a little distance, a little objectivity between you and really, whatever it is.

P-7 shared about working as a Black female principal, making the best decisions for the minority students that she served:

I think you know, standing on your word, being who you are authentically and boldly, knowing that the decisions that you're making are in the best interest of kids. You know, it's already hard being a principal. But it's hard being a Black principal, and it's even harder being a Black principal in a low-performing school. We have to make decisions. Everybody's not going to like your decisions, and they're not going to understand it.

Principals in the study cited evidence to support the need for education leaders and policymakers to call out inequities and create systems to ensure that practices are more equitable across the board.

Theme 3: Accountability Without Autonomy

Study participants voiced frustration with accountability along with district and state requirements, in addition to the lack of autonomy they had in making what they believed would have been the best decisions to meet the unique needs of their campuses.

Focus on Accountability and Testing

Of the seven study participants, five principals discussed the district's heightened focus on accountability. According to participants, students routinely took required district tests (benchmarks) to measure progress toward student learning goals. P-3 shared, "And I can't avoid using this district-mandated assessment. We test the kids to death."

Principals also shared that the focus of supervisor visits was to determine progress towards improvement on these test data results. P-7 emphasized, “You know it was always about the test scores.” P-5 recalled having repeated conversations about assessment data during supervisor visits.

Not only was the focus on assessments a priority, but principals felt the frustration of ongoing testing, which interfered with teaching and learning. The study participants strongly agreed that districts are only concerned about testing results and accountability. Study responses referenced the need for learning agencies to consider the unique challenges of low-performing schools when focusing on test performance and developing accountability systems that do not consume their time.

District Requirements (Strict Practices)

In reference to district requirements, all study participants noted the increased workload adhering to district expectations, which interfered with their capacity to prioritize campus needs. Four principals specifically discussed how district requirements impacted their work. P-7 shared frustration with preparing and presenting campus data from the latest assessments to officials and board members, impairing their ability to manage the arduous tasks of leading improvement:

And I’m thinking, can I be a principal please? Can I be a principal? So, that was probably the biggest challenge that caught me off guard. Just the constant district feedback. Having to present data every other week, you know, to the board and showing them where we are.

Pushing these strict practices on principals of low-performing schools further impacted their ability to perform the work necessary to meet the needs of the students in their roles.

As mentioned earlier, principals shared dissatisfaction with the district curriculum. P-5 voiced concern with the strict guidelines for implementing the required curriculum. P-3 also noted difficulty with the district's prompting to teach the curriculum according to set parameters:

They said we have to teach you this way so they [teachers] don't step outside of the box to do that anymore. And so it's like that creative side of teaching is lost because I'm so busy trying to teach to the standard of the book per se versus, I know this is what would be helpful to students if I were to include this in the actual lesson.

State Requirements (Unreasonable Requirements)

Five of the seven participants shared that state requirements also impacted their role. P-7 shared that low-performing schools had 12 indicators on their improvement plan compared to non-low-performing schools with only three. P-4 shared, "So ultimately, you need to be Tier 1." P-4 added that her school was, at the time, accredited with conditions, meaning they needed to meet specific passing parameters to be considered Tier 1 status.

In reference to teacher observations, P-7 shared that the state required two 45-minute observations for experienced teachers and three for beginning teachers. P-7 shared, "So in addition to those basic requirements, low-performing schools had to have an additional observation to justify why those [new] teachers are in the classroom." P-5 shared the following state requirements of teacher evaluation standards: "But because my

school is a low-performing school, everybody on my staff has to be assessed on standards one through five.” On the contrary, schools not labeled as low performing are only assessed on two standards.

Theme 4: More Complex Challenges Serve as Barriers to Improvement

Below are responses from study participants regarding two significant challenges with the work. Principals cited how their campuses struggled with classroom behavior and challenges in the surrounding community and the impact on improvement.

Challenges With Classroom Management

All seven study participants emphasized ongoing issues in their schools with classroom behavior management and overall schoolwide behavior concerns. According to participant responses, principals expected students to learn to take responsibility for their behavior. P-6 cited numerous behavior issues in which students blatantly refused to follow campus directives. P-3 offered this perspective, “If kids can’t control their behavior or know that you’re in charge or respect that, they’re not going to learn.”

Principals also expected teachers to implement effective discipline management plans. P-5 added that she had to handle ongoing behaviors as they arose, citing that some teachers struggled with developing and implementing an effective classroom management plan. P-4 shared that sixth grade brought most discipline issues as they struggled to adjust to middle school: “Um, discipline is always an area that teachers struggle with.”

P-1 shared concern over the struggle of new teachers to control the negative behaviors in their classrooms: “You cannot teach unless you get that part taken care of.”

P-5 shared, “There was this inconsistency with teachers executing expectations throughout the building.” Principals also shared that their new teachers needed support managing various classroom behaviors.

Challenges Within the Community

Study participants shared awareness of gangs and neighborhood violence in the communities surrounding the schools where they led. These are risk factors that impact school functioning and influence student outcomes. P-4 shared concerns about gang involvement of students who seemed to follow in the footsteps of their parents, who were also involved in gangs: “But the kids definitely deal with gangs, but they’re dealing with it because their parents were in it.” P-3 shared how gang violence can interrupt the school day: “So this particular situation was a gang fight, and all of these girls jumped on this one student.” P-4 shared the impact of fights happening over the weekend: “Monday is always interesting. I mean the kids; they fight over the weekend. Police are involved, and gangs are involved.” P-3 also shared, “There will be a fight over the weekend. Families would be arguing and going back and forth and would bring it to the school on Monday.” While many of these issues originate in the neighborhoods surrounding low-performing schools referenced by principals in this study, they could significantly impact a school’s overall improvement.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

I took the following steps to establish this study’s credibility. I reviewed numerous articles on Black female principals, most focusing on leadership in low-

performing schools, several articles about low-performing schools and their surrounding communities, and several others on the success or lack thereof of principal preparation programs. Using the purposive sampling technique, I could directly target participants who met the inclusion criteria and could add value to the research. Researching and speaking directly to the target population helped establish credibility for the study. The entire process and analysis are based on the information provided by the participants using audio recordings. I included every step of the coding process along with data analysis. Themes emerged after evaluating all the research data.

Transferability

Transferability in this study is established by ensuring alignment with the problem, purpose, methodology, and data collection technique. For example, this research problem is that low-performing schools routinely led by Black female principals continue to fall below academic accountability performance standards and need help sustaining improvement amidst complex conditions. The purpose is to explore and voice the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools so that educational and political leaders can understand what Black female principals believe should be incorporated in principal preparation programs amid an education system consumed by complexity, particularly within underserved communities. I used the qualitative research method and interviews as the data collection instrument. Also, I provided the reasons for choosing this research coding strategy, developing the themes, and determining the results. By providing the above steps, the results of this study could

be transferred to other research studies using similar measures and the methodologies described in the study.

Dependability

I ensured dependability in this study by documenting and maintaining every procedure and document regarding the research, including the recruitment flyers, audio recordings, interview transcripts, and the reason for aligning my code process with Bryman's four stages of coding. I distributed recruitment flyers by posting in three types of social media groups: (1) where school principals were the general audience, (2) where Black principals were the primary audience, and (3) where Black female principals were the likely audience. Also, I documented the processes of categorizing the codes, data analysis procedures, and their development. Email responses from prospective study participants consenting to the study were reviewed and saved upon receipt. I also saved the approved Walden University Form C, the Ethics self-check application for the IRB, and the approval letter to conduct the study.

Confirmability

Thorough coding and data analysis established consistency in the results. As stated before, I used coding and data analysis methods to develop Bryman's four stages of coding (Carpendale et al., 2017). For example, I used this strategy because it provided a framework for a gradual coding process, categorizing, and then developing themes. I used this same process with participant responses to every question to establish consistency throughout the data analysis process. The results will show the commonality of research participants' experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions. The data will

show the percentage of participants who shared the same experience, thought, belief, and perception for each research question.

Summary

Chapter 4 began with information on how the data was collected and analyzed. This chapter also briefly discussed the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools and the perceived barriers of the work. Participant responses to interview questions aligned with study research questions were presented as a part of one of the four themes using specific context provided by participants. The inclusion of data tables offers additional context for the data. Participant responses were aligned with the four themes and subsequent subthemes to provide context and deepen understanding of how they apply to the research questions and purpose of the study. The chapter ended with cohesive responses to each of the two research questions. Chapter 5 will include an interpretation of the study findings, limitations, recommendations, and implications.

Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

This study aimed to explore and voice the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools so that educational and political leaders can understand what study participants believe should be incorporated into principal preparation programs amid an education system consumed by complexity, particularly within underserved communities. I used a generic qualitative study design for this research to allow participants to share their experiences. The study was conducted to fill a gap in the existing literature, as few studies have highlighted the voices of Black female principals and what they believe is needed to lead improvement in low-performing schools. The results of this study can be used to help education officials and policymakers make decisions regarding changes to components of principal preparation programs to support Black female principals routinely selected to lead low-performing schools.

The findings suggest that education and policy officials should revisit current preparation programs to design coursework with components aligned to leadership in low-performing schools that meet the unique needs of the Black female principals who routinely serve in this capacity.

Interpretation of the Findings

The experiences shared by the Black female principals in this study are consistent with what research says about leadership in low-performing schools. Most of the schools were in areas with community issues like drugs, violence, gangs, and societal inequalities, along with low socioeconomic status, food insecurity, and single-parent

households. Low academic achievement was prominent in all schools, with a clear distinction between the academic performance of minority students and the increased focus from the district on the assessment performance of students in these schools. While the participants in the study expressed their passion for impacting change within their schools, they also reported experiencing challenges with improvement efforts due to strict guidelines and practices, little autonomy, a consistent focus on accountability, insufficient support for the principals leading the work, and race and gender bias.

Revisiting the study by Hung et al. (2019), society still endures inequalities within underserved communities based on race, gender, and financial status. These factors not only affect communities, but they are a fabric of the educational system and impact the academic achievement of minority students. Path dependency, a complex adaptive systems theory component, asserts that schools operate based on the foundation already in place (Fidan & Balchi, 2017). Many things need to align to begin changing the historical context of the current system and its chosen pathway. Path dependency, along with the beliefs, perceptions, identities, and ideals of the individuals who develop the policies and formulate the practices, determine the experiences of the Black female principal leading a low-performing school. This interpretation of the study is reflective of the complexities resulting from the historical inequalities that Black female principals believe characterize their work in low-performing schools. These functioning complexities are conditions of a dysfunctional school system (Laird, 2020).

In this section, the interpretations of findings are organized by theme and subsequent subthemes and align with the study's two research questions:

- RQ1: How do Black female principals describe the essential components of preparation, training, and support needed to manage complexities in low-performing schools?
- RQ2: How can the experiences of Black female principals of low-performing schools inform policies and programs to support them in leading improvement efforts successfully?

Theme 1: One Size Doesn't Fit All

The challenges of low-performing schools require a broader skillset than what traditional principal preparation programs provide (Parshardis et al., 2018). The results of this study indicated that conventional principal preparation programs fail to meet the preparation needs of Black female principals who are routinely chosen to lead low-performing schools. Exposure to rote coursework designed for the perceived and ideal school environment does not match the environment that characterizes a low-performing school. In a study by Wilkerson and Wilson (2017), African American principals did not believe their preparation programs were sufficient to prepare them for the work. In this study, P-4 voiced the sentiment shared by study participants regarding traditional preparation programs: “I don’t think that we took anything that specifically would have helped prepare for a low-performing school.” The subthemes discussed below represent suggested areas that principals valued as necessary components of principal preparation programs.

Leadership Communication and Advocacy

Study participants voiced a need to develop their professional communication skills further to garner commitment from their staff, leverage the support of stakeholders, and advocate for their schools. Little research has been done about preparing Black female principals to communicate as advocates as they lead the challenging work in low-performing schools. On the contrary, this study gathered the perspective of Black female principals who believed advocacy was a significant part of their work. P-7 affirmed, “You have to speak up. You have to advocate for those kids. In support of this claim, P-2 shared, “I think one thing is, you can’t be afraid to ask for what you need.” While traditional programs do not necessarily prepare leaders for advocacy, the Black female principals in this study voiced the importance of these efforts.

Supporting Teacher Growth and Development

Growing and developing teachers is a time-consuming but necessary component of the school improvement process and requires many hours and several rounds of observation, coaching, feedback, and follow-up. In their research, Chen-Levi et al. (2020) showed that school functioning improved once staff members began to understand the system and their role within its functioning. It can be concluded from the principal participants in this study that their focus on instruction solidified the role of the teacher as a viable contributor to the instructional program and the school’s overall success. P-1 established this position by sharing: “It [the day] typically starts with like doing some observations, just some walk-through instructional rounds.” P-7 added to this perspective: “I would say I spent most of my time in classrooms for two reasons. It was either

discipline or providing instructional feedback.” Citing her practice of prioritizing student growth with the help of her leadership team, P-4 shared: “We’re in classrooms every single day. The daily schedule begins with morning interventions and enrichment. It is targeted. It is all hands on deck.” Comments from principals highlighted the need for principals to help teachers understand the impact of their work on their students and how to facilitate effective practices for teacher support.

Self-Care for Stress

Black female principals are under a tremendous amount of pressure to make rapid improvements while experiencing the upending consequences of leading a low-performing school. Research by Cosner and Jones (2016) confirmed that the context of low-performing schools presents many challenges for the principals who lead them. These challenges can affect the mental health and wellness of school leaders. P-2 claimed, “It’s a lot of wear and tear on you.” P-5 echoed, “I had anxiety for the first year from the pressure that I put on myself.” Long hours and never-ending to-do lists cause stress and overwhelm for Black female principals leading in this context.

For study participants, various circumstances added pressure to the work, but meeting accountability measures was at the top of all school leaders’ minds. This is consistent with a previous study by Cosner and Jones (2016), which showed that accountability systems were a source of stress for school principals and that the stress related to accountability expectations is magnified in low-performing schools. P-1 supported this claim by emphasizing the pressure she was under in her school, which was

held to the same accountability standards as other schools, regardless of her school's performance status.

Black female principals would benefit from learning how stress and anxiety affect their minds, bodies, and emotions to help them understand their boundaries and limitations in this work. While coursework of this nature may be uncharacteristic for programs seeking to prepare principals for leadership, integrating such components while learning the foundational practices of leading the work can prompt Black female principals to prioritize their mental health and wellness. The participants' voices on the perspective of mental health and wellness signal their desire to incorporate these practices into their lives.

Facilitating Cultural Competence

Discontent surrounding cultural differences due to complexities from the historical context of inequalities within the community can affect the school climate and halt improvement efforts. The culture of the people, the events, and the school processes, along with their effect on school functioning, impact school environments (Shaked & Schechter, 2020). P-3 shared perceptions of teachers based on how they interacted with students: "I think some teachers are so judgmental and putting down someone when you don't know and are not in their shoes." On the contrary, P-6 shared experiences witnessing black and brown students referring to their White teachers as racist, which may be associated with the thoughts and opinions that their families hold. P-4 summarized this perspective by sharing that schools must be sensitive to the cultural dynamics within families when addressing student issues.

The results of this study indicate that principals would like to be able to facilitate best practices in cultural sensitivity within their buildings so that staff feel heard, students feel understood, and collectively, there is respect for each other so that the improvement process can progress. The participants shared that understanding cultural dynamics is vital in instruction, and they must be equipped to meet students where they are without judgment. The principals in this study seek preparation programs to prepare them with a solid foundation of cultural competence skills to mitigate conflicts that can arise and derail improvement efforts.

Theme 2: Extra Challenges, Require Extra Resources

As complex adaptive systems, schools are uniquely challenged, with low-performing schools encompassing an even more comprehensive range of challenges for the principals who lead them. According to research, when referring to complexity within a system, the focus is on how things change over time, given the organization's behavior (Rosenhead et al., 2019). With the many challenges that characterize low-performing schools, there is a need for additional support and resources to realign priorities that will lead to a change in the school's trajectory. The subthemes below summarize principal perceptions of areas where support is needed most.

Provide Supervisory Support and Mentoring

Supervisory support is a key component to the success of any principal. It is increasingly crucial for the principal to systemically work to lead improvement within a low-performing school. From a systems perspective, Johnson (2019) stated that systems operate effectively when effective relationships form, leading to the emergence of

structures. Commenting about the principal–supervisor relationship, P-5 emphasized the misalignment of the support she received compared to the support she requested, “So there was a disconnect in terms of what I’m telling you what I need for support.” P-3 echoed this perception of support, “It’s more about I got you because you’re not there yet rather than why didn’t you get there and what can we do to help you get there.”

As a result of the overwhelming mix of complexities within a low-performing school, principals aim to be partly supported by those who know and understand the magnitude of the work that goes into the school improvement process. Research by Preiser et al. (2018) confirmed that the system can change simply by responding to adjustments in how principals are supported. None of the principals in this study spoke about having a current supervisor with experience working in low-performing schools. P-4 did mention her experience engaging with leaders of turnaround schools and districts as a part of a program she participated in: “And so I do think that was beneficial because you had an opportunity to just learn from people.” Responses from participants in this study established the premise that having supervisory support from an individual who has led a low-performing school or has extensive knowledge and expertise in this area would be a significant piece of the improvement process. This best-fit support could aid in overcoming barriers to improvement amid surrounding complexities.

Invest in Meaningful and Targeted Principal Training Programs Focused on Practical Skills Needed for Low-Performing Schools

Evidence from the principal responses in this study indicates that the complexity of low-performing schools poses barriers to the improvement process. In their research,

Cosner and Jones (2016) found that the challenges principals of low-performing schools faced were far more significant than those faced by principals in higher-performing schools. Due to the complexities present within the low-performing school context, the principals in this study voiced the need for specialized training programs to prepare them for some of the inherent challenges within these schools. P-4 shared the benefit of learning about systems from the district-university partnership: “Looking at what we’re doing from a systems perspective, that’s been my biggest takeaway.” P-2 provided a perspective on the importance of gaining hands on experience like student teaching for teachers: “I think it may actually be beneficial to have residents; principal residents.” P-1 added that aspiring principals should create a handbook-type document that includes things like the vision, mission, organizational chart, and priorities before entering the leadership role. The training topics suggested above are not comprehensive but can add significant value to leadership capacity in a low-performing school.

Black female principals often enter their roles as leaders of low-performing schools without knowing what to expect. A study by Williams and Welsh (2017) characterized societal issues and their impact on communities as often beyond the control of leadership. P-6 shared on the students in her school: “Kids with parents impacted by drug addiction. Kids with parents impacted by mental health issues.” Parshardis et al. (2018) shared in their study that students in low-income areas lack basic needs, impacting their ability to perform well academically. In their research, P-4 shared comments about one of her students: “One of my students, he lost his mom recently. You know, we found that he was living alone at home.” These are just two situations out of the principal’s

control, leading to a low-performing school where training is needed to navigate sensitive situations. Making quick decisions surrounding complex issues proved to be challenging for participants in the study. P-4 shared, “It does feel like building the plane and flying it simultaneously, except the plane has kids on it.” Despite their challenges, Black female principals lead this work in large numbers and should be provided with applicable support to handle the problems that arise.

Match the Strongest Teachers/Staff with the Schools in Greatest Need

The needs of students in low-performing schools are extensive and require teachers with more experience and training. Research by Gopalan (2019) confirmed that the achievement gap is connected to socioeconomic conditions in various geographic locations, proving a need for higher-quality teaching within low-performing schools to address these gaps. This claim is supported by research from Williams and Welsh (2017), who concluded that circumstances surrounding the life of students outside of school impact how teachers teach and how students learn. Comments by P-4 add further context, “From my opinion, when you’re working in a low-performing environment, you know you’re going to have some teachers that need a lot of help.” This is further supported by the response P-3 shared regarding students in upper grades that needed lower-level instruction:

A lot of my teachers in 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades especially did not know how to teach reading at that lower level because they never had to, right? So now you’re trying to teach them something that they were never taught how to teach: small group instruction.

P-4 shared a similar perspective, “It’s like two things. You have kids who are below grade level, but when you dig deeper, you’re looking at teachers who have gaps in content knowledge as well.”

This study showed that low-performing schools are routinely staffed with teachers who do not have the experience necessary to contribute to the growth of the students and the success of the low-performing school environment. P-4 concluded, “So, you have weaker teachers who are teaching at the weaker schools.” P-7 claimed that the average teacher in her school was a beginning teacher with less than three years of experience. P-5 supported this claim by sharing, “So we have to really push and make sure that teachers are knowledgeable and prepared.

According to the principals in this study, competing priorities interfered with their capacity to fully develop inexperienced teachers for teaching within a low-performing school. P-3 shared, “The other thing is, just like I said, going back and trying to help teachers learn their craft. I had to show them, here’s how you teach this to children.” P-2 maintained, “It really takes three to five years really to develop a really, really sound teacher that should be in a low-performing school.” P-2 also added,

So it’s hard to develop teachers in content when you really do not have a lot of time. You know. It’s almost like you have to accelerate the learning because you have nine months to come off this list [low performing], and it takes longer than that to develop a new teacher.

The principals’ voices in this study communicate that managing the complex challenges of low-performing schools leaves little time to implement thorough coaching practices to

support the growth of inexperienced teachers. This further supports their desire for more experienced teachers to improve student achievement on their campuses.

Provide More Resources to Train and Mentor New Teachers

Principals in this study voiced their concern with the placement of new and inexperienced teachers on low-performing schools' campuses. However, they also understand that this is still their reality, prompting them to seek resources and support for new teachers. A study by Reitman & Karge (2019) concluded that teachers need support from the first day of teaching until they can build their capacity in individual relationships, pedagogical knowledge, teacher perceptions of professional competence, mentoring, professional learning, and reflection. P-2 shared her perspective on the professional competence of teachers she characterizes as millennials: "They're millennials and millennials sometimes their work ethics are different." 6-1 also shared thoughts on new young teachers: "Then there's the newbies who are like, oh my God, this is not anything like I thought it was going to be." Ensuring that principals know what support new teachers need to grow and can help them improve their craft while at the same time growing as professionals is a crucial component of mentorship and training.

Provide Up-to-Date and Consistent Curriculum and Materials

Curriculum and materials related to instruction are a foundational part of the raising student achievement. A study by et al. Dimmock (2021), shared that curriculum and instruction have an impact on complexity levels. Principals from this study shared their comments on how curriculum issues impacted their work. P-3 shared problems with curriculum in her district: "We'll get a curriculum and have that curriculum for at least

three or four year and then they change it. Three years is the amount of time that it takes for teachers to really get it under their belt.” P-6 also commented on the issues with curriculum in their district and spotlighted the importance of research curriculum to understand what is best for students that may have learning gaps: “So the notion of reading research, using it to inform your practice using data to drive instruction. Having an articulated curriculum that’s alive and iterative.” Principals in this study emphasized the need to adopt curriculum that cannot only meet the needs of their students but also one that will lay the foundation and won’t change year to year.

Stronger Policies on Equity and Biases Surrounding Race and Gender

Black female principals willingly lead low-performing schools and often, it is without the training and support they need to make the substantial expected improvement in a specified amount of time. What makes this difficult are historical barriers and societal inequalities that challenge improving low-performing schools. Research by Hung et al. (2019) asserts that structural disparities related to racism, gender, and socioeconomic status have had an impact on the education system. Because of their intersectionality, the perception is that Black female principals can better engage with the students, parents, and the community in leadership of low-performing schools, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will be chosen to lead.

The Black female principals of this study shared that they received little to no training and support that aligned explicitly with the magnitude of the work they were responsible for leading. Four of 7 principals shared either a personal experience or one of a colleague, which was consistent with the concept of path dependency, citing that as

complex adaptive systems, the school and its development are dependent on past experiences. Inequalities impact community functioning and devalue the quality of life for the families living in it. As society has normalized in lower-income communities in which Black and Hispanic students attending lower-performing schools reside, the available support services are often out of reach, untimely, unattainable, or pale in comparison to what is needed to improve living conditions. Research by Flores (2018) suggested that a lack of resources, support, and opportunity contributes to low performance. As families must make it work with the resources that they have, so must the principals who lead these schools.

Leading in this context is all-consuming and often seems more about the survival of Black female principals in the role, which takes away from the true purpose of the work of improving academic outcomes. With path dependency in complex adaptive systems, after a pathway forms, it is difficult to change directions (Loga et al., 2022). Of the seven principals in this study, five shared their concerns about removing principals without providing the necessary support to make incremental gains. P-1 shared about pressure, expectations, and survival in the leadership role: “I believe eventually you will succumb to all of it, and you’ll be pushed out.” The education system has made a practice of hiring Black female principals to lead schools that no one else wants to lead, providing substandard or misaligned support, and then replacing them for not meeting growth targets. P- 2 shared, “You cannot keep removing Black female principals, or you will end up in the same boat.”

Theme 3: Accountability Without Autonomy

Previous research shows that the principal struggles to facilitate growth while meeting accountability measures and meeting the needs of the school's staff, students, and the surrounding community (Cosner & Jones 2016). The results of this study confirm this with study participants expressing their concerns with the focus on accountability from district and state officials while they sought to manage the daily complexities of managing a low-performing school. In addition, principals voiced dissatisfaction with district and state requirements, which is intensified for low-performing schools.

Focus on Accountability and Testing

Due to the pressure to make incremental gains within a short time, the principals in this study emphasized the focus on the test scores and meeting district and state standards which is consistent with a study by Huilla (2019), citing that there is more focus on accountability than what it takes to improve schools outside of accountability parameters. P-3 shared, "And I can't get away from using this district-mandated assessment." P-6 shared, "It goes back to the data. Really understanding the data and knowing how to interpret the data because that is such a big piece of what we do." P-3 reiterated, "We're testing the kids to death." Principals shared that assessments were the window to success for each step of their improvement journey.

District Requirements (Strict Practices)

Principals in this study commented on the strict practices that were required by their districts which made it difficult to do the work of school improvement. In their study, Williams and Welch (2017), shared that the focus of school improvement is on

accountability but leaves little room to address the daily complex issues that principals in this context face. P-2 shared that her frustration with facilitating PLC (Professional Learning Communities) session, coaching teachers, and addressing behavior problems along with keeping up with paperwork: “And then on top of that all the paperwork demands that we have to do” P-3 added dissatisfaction over strict requirements regarding curriculum implementation: “You know I have a new curriculum and then I’m expected to teach ELA (English Language Arts) in a certain way and that’s the district.”

In addition to the strict practices mentioned above, responses from principals in this study highlighted a few additional concerns. P-7 cited the consistent communication from the district as a distraction: “Constant contact from the district drove me insane!” P-7 went on to add, “They keep calling me every single day!” P-1 shared the frustration with district certification requirements that create challenges for supporting new teachers: “And then to get the people that are in the certification department to be on the same page with what we are doing.” P-1 clarified that teachers are not able to stay after school to participate in professional development session because they have to attend sessions for their certification program.

State Requirements (Unreasonable Requirements)

State requirements add another layer of accountability for the school principal. Policymakers also operated from this perspective by incorporating into ESSA that states must develop an accountability system that would hold districts accountable for the academic progress of their schools (Klein, 2016). Principals would argue that they know what is best for their students. P-3 stated,

And so what do you do when you tell people, that is, you don't allow them the flexibility or even the autonomy to say, oh, but this part I think would really be good for my students, because I know them better than you do.

On the contrary, principals also understand the path forward to get off the state's low-performing list and respond accordingly, changing their instructional model to ensure that they hit the target. P-4 shared, "Because I know the formulas for the state. I could use growth to get our school accredited." Principals in this study understood what success on state assessments looked like to support their efforts in changing the trajectory of their school's performance status.

Theme 4: More Complex Challenges Serve as Barriers to Improvement

Behavior challenges are a characteristic of low-performing schools. Research by Wilkerson and Wilson (2017) highlighted those delinquent behaviors challenge attendance and student academic achievement. In this study, principals discussed two significant barriers to improvement: student behavior and classroom management practices of teachers. These two issues within the school system add layers of complexity, creating obstacles to improved performance.

Challenges With Classroom Management

Behavior and classroom management have an impact on the improvement process. Cosner and Jones (2019) confirmed in their study that issues like safety in schools impacted improvement steps, and student behaviors posed additional challenges to the school improvement process. P-1 shared concern for problems with classroom management: "And then a lot of new teachers, what they struggle with the most is

behavior or classroom management. You cannot teach unless you get that part taken care of.” P-6 discussed how schools do not have as much say in determining the discipline process because of the emergence of restorative practices to address behaviors: “The principals should be able to say, yeah, that’s not it, let’s do that again tomorrow. You need to go home and come back. But you couldn’t do that.” P-3 shared the same experiences, “There were a lot of discipline problems.” Whether it is a schoolwide behavior disruption or an issue with how teachers manage their classrooms, these issues serve as barriers to improvement that must be dismantled with effective strategies.

Challenges Within the Community

A study by Williams and Welsh (2017) characterized societal issues and their impact on communities as often beyond the control of leadership. Black female principals frequently enter their roles as leaders of low-performing schools without knowing what to expect. Parshiaridis et al. (2018) shared in their study that students in low-income areas lack basic needs, impacting their ability to perform well academically. In their research, Cosner and Jones (2016) affirmed that the challenges principals of low-performing schools faced were far more significant than those of higher-performing schools. Making quick decisions surrounding complex issues proved to be challenging for participants in the study. Despite their challenges, Black female principals in this study were committed to the good and the bad but believed that the support for what they truly needed was simply not there.

Limitations

To address the limitation of the possible disclosure of participants' information, which could cause unanticipated harm to the participant. I ensured that participants were unidentifiable by creating and assigning a coding system to mask participant identities. To ensure confirmability, in addition to the measures presented in Chapter 1, I confirmed participant responses by repeating responses back to the participant during the interview process before moving on to the next question.

As shared in Chapter 1, I used the IRB guidelines to ensure ethical research and minimize researcher bias. I disclosed to participants that I was an educator and a former principal. The selected participants were not anyone that I have supervised as a principal in the past. Additionally, I made sure not to choose anyone associated with my current responsibilities within the organization. I also maintained a reflexive journal, as mentioned in Chapter 1, to ensure an accurate record of the entire research process.

I did maintain accurate records during the research. I used reflexive journaling at the start of the data collection process to think through the challenges I incurred early on with the initial interest of potential participants in the study. The journal also served to help me separate my experiences from that of research participants. My journaling process expanded into creating charts to code and categorize responses and notate key findings throughout the interviewing process. I developed this comprehensive study journal to house relevant codes and responses, a calendar of when I shared flyers on social media, and the dates participants responded to and scheduled interviews according

to pre-designed codes. I also maintained interview recordings and transcripts, as shared in Chapter 1. All these tasks ensured an accurate account of the research process.

Recommendations

Future Research Recommendations

For a more concentrated study, further research could explore the leadership of Black female principals of low-performing schools centralized in one state or region. Later research could also examine the needs of Black female principals leading low-performing schools in rural areas across the United States to determine preparation needs that may differ from those in urban areas.

Another recommendation is to gain participation from Black female principals who lead or have led low-performing schools in the western part of the United States to determine relevant and everyday experiences compared to other regions. With information on principals in the different areas, policymakers can gain more insight into necessary changes based on the relevance of experiences of Black female principals across the country.

Yet another recommendation for future research is regarding advocacy efforts of Black female principals leading low-performing schools. Little research has been done on how principal preparation programs prepare courses that can support Black female principals in using effective communication to serve as advocates for their schools. Future research in this area would add to the body of knowledge and help researchers to gain more insight into the best communication strategies that Black female principals

learned from their preparation programs and how they used them to support their advocacy efforts.

A final recommendation would be to expand on studies of experiences of Black female principals in low-performing schools with district leadership of varying race and ethnic backgrounds to determine differences in preparation and support. Hearing the voices of Black female principals leading low-performing schools in other regions will help determine if there is a need for policy changes that would require education agencies to incorporate, re-establish, or revise specific training to address cultural sensitivity, conscious and unconscious biases, and other issues concerning race relations for district personnel.

Future Policy Recommendations

According to participant responses and the application of the complex adaptive systems theory, several ideas emerged from shared perspectives. From these perspectives, the following policy revisions can benefit the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools. Incorporating coursework on complexity management will aid in equipping Black female principals with leading improvement in the complex environment of a low-performing school. Black female principals can rethink their leadership in low-performing schools if they learn to implement complexity management practices like environmental scanning, environmental manipulation, reshaping schools, and promoting creativity and innovation (Fidan, 2017).

1. Environmental scanning – scanning changes in the environment due to uncertainty while becoming familiar with organizational activities and interactions caused by the complex climate.
2. Environmental manipulation - changing the environment to which systems components will adapt to influence progress and prompt emerging potential behaviors.
3. Reshaping schools – consideration of
 - a. setting different goals for different subunits,
 - b. undertaking various strategic activities to attain goals,
 - c. decentralizing decision-making processes, interactions, and connections and,
4. Promoting creativity and innovation –developing a new way of thinking and innovation impacting the application process of specific activities (Fidan, 2017).

If Black female principals of low-performing schools see schools as stable with clear social roles and predictable patterns, they will struggle to see real change. If principals can learn more about this complexity management process, they will increase their chances of overall success for the school. This linear perspective is hardly the context in which low-performing schools operate. Education and policy officials must develop preparation programs that help potential leaders of low-performing schools view these schools as complex, unpredictable, and uncertain school environments.

The ESSA was established to improve learning outcomes for all students, with measures to ensure equity in lower-performing schools (Kostyom et al., 2018). Even with policy guidance, students who need the most support still attend schools that lack adequate staffing and support and are still failing. States have greater flexibility to create policies to address the needs of low-performing schools (Fuller et al., 2017).

Federal education policy guides the preparation, hiring, and training of principals and the distribution of teachers, ultimately impacting improvement in low-performing schools. The guidance of ESSA requires states to provide sound evidence for initiatives that align with policy parameters (Fuller et al., 2017). One recommendation is to add guidance for states to integrate content relative to how principals can use professional communication skills to strengthen advocate effects.

A second recommendation is for state and district agencies to launch internal evaluation teams to conduct re-occurring evaluations on adherence, alignment, and implementation of their policies to the federal policy. These learning agencies must be responsive to data that finds where they fall short in supporting leadership in low-performing schools. Practices like this may help to ensure further that local and state officials are adhering to federal policy standards and implementing practices designed to support the improvement of low-performing schools.

Future Practice Recommendations

According to research, society has not found a solution to improving chronically low-performing schools (Schueler et al., 2021). The prospect of school turnaround is relatively low without support from those engaging with the research. Future practice for

low-performing schools led by Black female principals includes a mindset shift for districts supporting these schools.

One practice recommendation is for Black female principals new to leading a low-performing school to participate in a mentorship program. Assigned mentors should have a wealth of knowledge of various leadership models, experience in leading improvement on a low-performing campus, and an understanding of how to successfully manage the complexities surrounding the leadership of performing schools. These programs include those run by school districts, partnerships between districts and local universities, or principal associations that strategically match mentors with mentees. One such association is the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA, n.d.), which supports principals with zero to three years of experience.

A second practice recommendation would be the development of a pipeline of principals recruited and trained to lead low-performing schools. The work of low-performing schools is challenging and, quite frankly, intimidating to Black female leaders due to the consequences that can result in their failure to turn the school around. School districts can attract more principals to the role by ensuring that training and support are strategically facilitated for improvement. Principal pipeline programs recruit, prepare, support, and retain leaders, which can help improve outcomes for students in low-performing schools (NCSL, 2023). School districts can find guidance through the Wallace Foundation, which has developed a Principal Pipeline Learning Community (Wallace Foundation, 2023) to support school districts in creating their pipelines.

A third practice recommendation includes advocacy efforts. There has been little research on preparing Black female principals in strengthening their communication skills to serve as advocates for the schools in which they lead. Whether it was speaking to district department about campus needs or presenting assessment data to stakeholders, principals in this study understood to need for strong communication skills to obtain resources to support the needs of their students.

A final practice recommendation is for school districts to create more partnerships with local universities. One of the bright spots of the study was the positive responses on district partnerships from three of the seven participants. These partnerships supported principals in several ways, including aspiring principals, mentorship, and first-year principals with content relative to school improvement. Partnerships like these will fill the gaps that traditional preparation programs and school districts miss in the preparation and support of Black female principals.

Implications for Social Change

Implications for positive social change include increased understanding of the needs of Black female principals leading low-performing schools. This study was conducted to fill the gap in hearing the preparation and training needs of Black female principals who lead low-performing schools. The data is essential to public policy and administration because it can facilitate a better understanding of the unique experiences of Black female principals and the support needed to facilitate improvement. Education officials and policymakers should consider the findings of this study as they actively evaluate principal preparation programs and district support for low-performing schools.

Additional implications include a variety of positive outcomes for students who attend low performing school and the communities in which they live. The following are potential outcomes:

1. Closing the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students would increase access and opportunities for all students ensuring that society not only considers equality but also embraces equity as a means to improve the overall functioning of the educational system.
2. Cultivating culturally sensitive environments in schools would foster a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics within a low-performing school which can impact communities and potentially change the trajectory of the lives of minority students and the educators who serve them.
3. With the necessary resources and support, Black female principals chosen to lead this work can help to improve the quality of education in underserved communities thereby challenging thoughts surrounding path dependency and level of educational attainment possible for the children and families that reside there.

Conclusion

Low-performing schools struggle to make targeted academic progress as determined by local and state accountability measures. Black female principals are routinely chosen to lead these schools attended primarily by Black and Hispanic children. Preparation programs continue the work of preparing principals for school leadership but

fail to deliver content that has effectively aided Black female principals in leading amidst the systemic complexities present within the low-performing school context.

This study aimed to elevate the voices of Black female principals leading low-performing schools. The Black female principals in the study shared experiences in their leadership, including working to overcome barriers, imposture syndrome, biases, and lack of staffing and support to lead the work successfully. Although each participant highlighted challenges to their success as a Black female principal, their passion and commitment to the work were consistently evident throughout the process. Black female principals have historically led with attention to their staff, community, and families with a focus on change and building up the community (Tae Jang & Alexander, 2022). Participants in this study voiced that this work is connected to their passion.

Horace Mann was known as an advocate for public education. Beginning back in the 1830s his stated idea of public education was that it would be an opportunity for all. Over a century later, some may argue that education is quite the opposite--an equalizer of inequalities tied to race, ethnicity, and income (Hung et al., 2019). After entering their positions, the Black female principals in this study felt they were not adequately prepared. The training they receive was 'out of touch' with what they encountered on their campuses. The support they received was insufficient and lacked effectiveness. It is known that principals of all school contexts deal with challenges associated with discipline, community, societal issues, staffing, curriculum, and new teacher support. This gives context to how schools can be described as complex adaptive systems (Fidan & Blaci, 2017). Where the frustration lies with the participants from this study is that as

Black female principals leading the work in low-performing schools, they experienced challenges at higher levels of complexity than other school contexts but did not receive the specialized preparation, training and support needed to successfully manage these high-level complexities.

Changing mindsets caused by beliefs, perceptions, and conscious and unconscious biases will take time. The wounds of inequality present in our communities may never fully heal. While we wait for these things to take place, Black female principals are still only routinely placed in low-performing schools but take pride in their ability to connect and serve the population that often no one else wants to lead. Let us not continue to do them a disservice by not preparing for the work ahead and failing to support their change efforts. The impact is far broader and more significant, affecting our society for generations.

Black female principals are chosen for the work of leading low performing schools due to their historical experiences and connection to the work (De Bruyn & Mestey, 2020). Their intersectionality, resilience, strength, and nurturing personality can be perceived as a good fit for this school context. Larcy et al., (2021) shared that facilitating improvement in low-performing schools is an act of social justice. Black female principals are viewed as caring and compassionate advocates which, due to years of historical barriers related to race and culture inequalities are innately connected to this work. If policy makers and education officials could truly understand the experiences of Black female principals, they would see the need to develop specialized preparation, training, and support to help them to lead the change work. This coupled with their

natural skills and abilities to work in this challenging environment would be a very powerful combination impacting student achievement across all races and cultures.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The following protocol will be followed throughout the interview process:

Interview Preparation

- Study participants will read the informed consent and agree to participate.
- The researcher/interviewer will set a date and time for the Zoom interview.
- The researcher/interviewer will contact the participants on the agreed-upon date and time using the Zoom link provided to conduct the interview.
- To maintain confidentiality, the researcher/interviewer will ensure a quiet space with no interruptions for the allotted block of time.

Before the Interview

The researcher will verify that the participants meet the criteria by asking the following:

- Do you currently serve as a principal of a K-12 public school labeled as low-performing? OR within the past 3 years, have you been a principal in a K-12 public school labeled low-performing?
- What is/was the name of your school? Your district? The state?
- What is/was your school's most recent rating that classified it as low performing?

During the Interview

- The researcher/interviewer will use two technology devices; a computer to facilitate the interview via Zoom and a handheld device as a backup recording to the Zoom recording feature.
- The researcher/interviewer will use a Word document populated with the interview questions to take notes during the interviews.

- The researcher/interviewer will set the timer at the start of the interview for 60 minutes.

Part I: Introduction

The interviewer will follow the script below:

Introduction

Thank you so much for joining me today for this research study interview. My name is Kimberly Seymore, and I am the researcher/interviewer for this study.

Purpose of the research.

This study will explore and voice the experiences of Black female principals leading low-performing schools so that educational and political leaders can understand what is needed for principal preparation programs amid an education system consumed by complexity, particularly within underserved communities.

Overview of the research process

You have received the informed consent to participate in the study by email and have agreed to participate. Do you still wish to participate in this study?

Address Confidentiality

As the consent form mentions, your information will be kept strictly confidential. All information will be stored in a database using codes so no one can determine who participated in the study.

Recording

The interview will be recorded to ensure I can reference your responses throughout the research process. Do you consent to be recorded? If you do not consent, you cannot participate in the study.

Participant Incentive

After we complete our interview today, I will transcribe the interview verbatim.

As mentioned in the email with information related to the study, you will receive a \$20 electronic gift card via email within 5 days after completion of the interview.

Part II: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your work as a principal in a low-performing school.
2. Share some surprises or unexpected things you have encountered in your role up to this point.
3. What supports are most important to you as a Black woman principal leading a low-performing school?
4. Tell me about any training or preparation you received before beginning your role as principal at this school.
5. If you were in charge of developing a principal preparation program, what components would you include to ensure that Black female principals are prepared to lead in low-performing schools?
6. Is there anything that I should have asked but did not?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Part II: Conclusion of Interview

The interviewer will conclude the interview with the following:

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study on Black female principals managing complexity while leading low-performing schools. Please look for your electronic gift card to be delivered to your email within 5 days. Do you have any questions for me at this time?

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix B: Interview Note Catcher

Participant #: _____

	Question/Responses	Notes
1	Tell me about your work as a principal in a low-performing school.	
2	Share some surprises or unexpected things you have encountered in your role up to this point.	
3	What supports are most important to you as a Black woman principal leading a low-performing school?	
4	Tell me about any training or preparation you received before beginning your role as principal at this school.	
5	If you were in charge of developing a principal preparation program, what components would you include to ensure that Black female principals are prepared to lead in low-performing schools?	
6	Is there anything that I should have asked but did not?	
7	Is there anything else you would like to share?	

Appendix C: Data Coding Chart RQ1

Participant #: _____

	Raw Data	Preliminary Code	Final Code
	Example 1 I am often overwhelmed with everything that needs to be done daily	Time management	1 Support with prioritizing
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

Appendix D: Data Coding Chart RQ2

Participant #: _____

	Raw Data	Preliminary Code	Final Code
	<p>Example</p> <p>1 I am often overwhelmed with everything that needs to be done daily.</p>	Time management	1 Support with prioritizing
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

[illegible]

Appendix G: Categories, Themes & Subthemes

Category	Principal Preparation Programs			
Theme	One Size Doesn't Fit All			
Subthemes	Leadership communication & advocacy	Supporting teacher growth and development	Self-care for stress	Facilitating cultural competence
Participant Responses	I had to learn how to communicate with my staff P-5 Leadership development is important P-2 It goes back to building relationships P-3 They need to know how to have hard conversations P-6	The proficient teachers that I did have were in elective classes P-1 Weakest teachers teaching in the weakest schools that don't make sense P-4	The self-care piece is critical P-7 Writing a letter to myself, things will get rough, keep your head up P-3 The importance of self-care and exercise P-6 It's a lot of wear and tear on you P-2 A course about taking care of mental health and wellness P-1 I had anxiety for the year from the pressure I put on myself P-5	Then we are perceived as the angry Black woman P-7 They previously had a White principal. I was coming in as a Black principal P-6
Category	Support			
Theme	Extra Challenges Require Extra Resources			
Subthemes	Provide supervisory support and mentoring	Invest in meaningful and targeted principal training programs focused on practical skills needed for low-performing schools.	Match the strongest teachers/staff with the schools in greatest need	Provide more resources to train and mentor new teachers
Participant Responses	A mentor would be helpful P-4 I didn't understand a lot as a 1 st year principal P-7	The district partners with an organization to be a part of a cohort P-5 But not one time did they ask now are you doing P-7	The proficient teachers that I did have were in elective classes P-1 Weakest teachers teaching in the weakest schools that don't make sense P-4	The staff are new and young P-2 I was only able to get brand new staff members P-1 New teachers are coming in young and not traditional P-4 New teachers were like this is not anything I thought it would be P-6
Participant Responses	Provide up-to-date and consistent curriculum and materials	Stronger policies on equity and biases surrounding race and gender.		
Participant Responses	Ensuring that we have all our curriculum and textbooks on time P-2 Teachers need to go back and reteach P-3 Excellent tier one instruction P-6	You can't keep pushing [Black female principals] out P-2 Can't get teacher to come work at low performing schools P-1 We are perceived as the angry Black woman P-7 For some reason, this profession and this system eats Black women alive P-6		

Category	Accountability			
Theme	Accountability Without Autonomy and Resources			
Subthemes	Focus on accountability and testing.	District requirements (strict practices)	State requirements (unrealistic requirements)	
Participant Responses	So it's like that creative side of teaching is lost because I'm so busy trying to teacher to the standard P-3	And then on top of that all the paperwork demands that we have to do P-2 They said we have to teach you this way so they don't step outside of the box to do that anymore P-3 Having to present data every other week...to show them where we are P-7	Then there was the state P-6 The state gives us the same provisions and holds us to the same accountability level as everyone else P-1 There are some things that the state required P-5 We had indicators on the improvement plan we had to assess P-7	
Category	Barriers			
Theme	More Complex Challenges Serve as Barriers to Improvement			
Subthemes	Challenges win Classroom Management	Challenges within the Community		
Participant Responses	You cannot teach unless you get that behavior taken care of P-1 I've really tried to get staff on board. You have to be able to control your classroom P-3 Teachers were struggling with classroom management P-5	I could be talking to one family, and they are on one side of the gang and then you got the other family on the other side P-4 They fight over the weekend P-3		

Appendix H: Codes, Categories, Subthemes by Participant

Principal Preparation Programs								
Codes	Subthemes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Professional Communication	Leadership communication & advocacy			Yes			Yes	
Building Relationships				Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Teacher Development	Supporting teacher growth and development	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Self-care and Mental heath	Self-care for stress	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
Cultural sensitivity	Facilitating cultural competence			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Support								
Mentorship	Provide supervisory support and mentoring		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Supervisory support		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes
Nuts and bolts Policies Procedures School law	Invest in meaningful and targeted principal training programs focused on practical skills needed for low-performing schools		Yes				Yes	Yes
Staffing issues Unqualified Ineffective	Match the strongest teachers/staff with the schools in greatest need	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
Teacher development	Provide more resources to train and mentor new teachers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Curriculum & Materials	Provide up-to-date and consistent curriculum and materials	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Inequitable practices	Stronger policies on equity and biases surrounding race and gender	Yes	Yes				Yes	Yes
Unconscious biases		Yes		Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
Intersectionality		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Accountability								
District focus on Accountability	Focus on accountability and testing	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
District Requirements	District requirements (strict practices)	Yes	Yes	Yes				yes
State Requirements	State requirements (unreasonable requirements)	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Barriers								
Classroom management	Challenges with Classroom management	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes		
Community Issues	Challenges within the community			Yes	Yes		Yes	

Appendix I: Codes and Categories

Categories				
Principal Preparation Programs		Support	Accountability	Barriers
Axial Codes				
Needs of preparation program	Existing preparation programs	Deficiencies in support Perceptions and perspectives	Campus targets	Campus discipline
In Vivo Codes				
Building relationships Cultural sensitivity	Nuts and bolts	Thought partner Intersectionality Angry Black woman	Autonomy	
Codes				
Professional communication Teacher development Self-care and mental health	Policies Procedures Laws	Mentorship Supervisory support Staffing issues Curriculum and Materials Inequitable practices Unconscious biases	District requirements State requirements Testing	Classroom management Behavior