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Supports and Barriers Experienced by African American Men Aspiring to Become Elementary School Principals

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Douglas Henry Handy

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2025

Abstract

Supports and Barriers Experienced by African American Men Aspiring to Become

Elementary School Principals

by

Douglas Henry Handy

MS, McDaniel College, 2008

BS, North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, 1995

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Educational Administration and Leadership

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

African American male elementary school principals are rare in diverse public school settings across the United States. The problem investigated was the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experience and understand supports and barriers related to becoming a principal. Guided by Hallinger and Murphy's instructional leadership theory, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants understand the supports and barriers to becoming principals. Data were collected using semistructured interviews with nine participants from a school district in the mid-Atlantic region who were state-certified and had been in the district for at least 3 years. Open and axial coding were used to support thematic analysis. The participants underscored the persistent structural barriers restricting equitable access to leadership roles. The participants highlighted the importance of socioeconomic contexts and resource disparities, culturally responsive leadership development, the need for systemic reforms in recruitment and retention, and the role of professional relationships and mentorship. The participants also highlighted the need for collaborative efforts to promote equity. Leaders could foster inclusive school climates, engage families and communities, and embody school missions. Implementing key recommendations of this study might help increase the representation of African American male leaders in elementary schools. This study may contribute to positive social change by addressing systemic barriers in hiring for school leadership, encouraging social equity, and enabling diverse future leaders to influence students, schools, and communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this EdD study to my parents, wife, and Dr. Mary Hallums, who has been my chairperson of the EdD committee.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the consistent support I have received from my family and friends.

I also acknowledge the research participants for sharing their time and perspectives.

Lastly, I acknowledge the content expertise and methodology support from my doctoral committee.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The number of diverse leaders is low in diverse schools (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024), and the number of K–12 African American school leaders was approximately 11% (Williams, 2024). Less than 30% of African American educators attended principal preparation programs due to systemic bias (Bastian & Drake, 2023). Researchers suggested hiring diverse school leaders with historical and community knowledge to align with the school districts' communities and sensitivity to issues in the communities they serve (Gooden et al., 2023).

Limited research exists on the pathways to the principalship for diverse male educators (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Lee & Mao, 2023; Smith, 2021). Furthermore, little research exists on how to address the low number of African American male school leaders (Smith, 2021). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive the supports and barriers to becoming principals. This study is important because the potential findings could lead to further research concerning the low number of African American male elementary school principal aspirants while supporting them to become principals.

This chapter presents the background, the problem, and the study's purpose to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive the supports and barriers to becoming elementary school principals. In addition, this chapter includes the nature of the study, the conceptual framework, and the research questions. The nature of the study provided information on the phenomenon and justification for

using a basic qualitative study. This chapter also presents the definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitation, limitations, significance, and summary.

Background

According to researchers and education preparation personnel, an underrepresentation of diverse educators in principal positions exists because of gender stereotyping and discrimination (Lee & Mao, 2023). Discriminatory barriers exist for diverse teachers who seek promotions into principal positions (Edwards & Anderson, 2023). The path to principalship is inequitable, and school leaders lack diversity (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Systemic leadership inequities continue to exist in schools and school districts in the United States (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). School district personnel find it difficult to recruit diverse principals, and fewer racial minority educational leaders become school principals (Lee & Mao, 2023). The principal pathway is challenging for African American educators who want to become school principals because of inequities and racial discrimination (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024; Bastian & Drake, 2023). School districts should offer aspiring leadership programs for the path to principalship (Tran et al., 2023). Thus, senior school district administrators should address racial problems (Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023).

Senior district administrators and board members should support diverse leaders to become principals (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). School district administrators must support African American male elementary school principal aspirants by helping these candidates learn leadership from principals and district leaders (Chan et al., 2022).

Aspiring principals transition from teachers to principals and have various school leadership roles, including assistant principals (Bastian & Drake, 2023).

Principals are responsible for instructional leadership, and African American male elementary school principal aspirants need support from school district administrators to overcome barriers to becoming school principals (Chan et al., 2022). The gap is the low number of African American male elementary school principal aspirants. I explored how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive the supports and barriers to becoming elementary school principals.

This study is important because the potential findings could lead to further research concerning the low number of African American male elementary school principal aspirants and could help them become principals. By exploring how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive the supports and barriers to becoming principals, senior district administrators and principals may use the findings to support African American male elementary school principal aspirants to become principals.

Problem Statement

The problem investigated is the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experience and understand supports and barriers related to becoming a principal. The number of diverse leaders is low in diverse schools (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024). Also, senior district administrators have reported a low number of African American male administrators (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022). Williams (2024) wrote that approximately 11% of school leaders are African

American because they lack adequate or accessible mentorship opportunities (Williams, 2024). Similar to the findings of Williams, Ellis Bowen (2020) wrote that the percentage of African American principals is 9%, highlighting the continued underrepresentation of African American educators in leadership roles within schools. Less than 30% of African American educators attend principal preparation programs due to systemic bias (Bastian & Drake, 2023). Despite efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in educational leadership, the low percentage of African American principals remains a significant concern, suggesting a need to ensure more equitable opportunities for aspiring leaders.

Researchers found that diverse school leaders support teachers and advocate for students (Tran et al., 2023). However, diverse educators are underrepresented in principal positions, and the pathway to principalship for male minority educators is challenging (Lee & Mao, 2023). Therefore, school districts should ensure an equitable and optimal learning environment inclusive of diversity, race, and gender (Gustafson et al., 2021).

School districts should implement equity-based policies to hire diverse leaders (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). District leaders and school board members should support diverse leaders by appreciating diversity and inclusion (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Moreover, district leaders should focus on improving the leadership of African American principals (Jones, 2024). A characteristic of African American male school leaders is caring leaders (Bass, 2020). Also, many African American male school leaders promote equity and create inclusive schools (Bass, 2020). However, racial inequity exists, and African American aspiring principals are not promoted to principals (Tran et al., 2023).

The research site is a public school district serving a diverse student population across its K–12 schools, which include approximately 110 elementary schools, 30 middle schools, and 20 high schools. With a total student enrollment of over 110,000, the district serves around 50,000 elementary school students, 23,000 middle school students, and 34,000 high school students. Despite the size of the student body, there is a noticeable lack of African American male principals at the elementary school level. This disparity is evident in the data presented in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4, which further highlights the challenges of increasing diversity within school leadership. The problem investigated is the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experience and understand supports and barriers related to becoming a principal.

In the state where this study was conducted, the department of education published statistics regarding the number of elementary school administrators, which included principals and assistant principals, by race/ethnicity and gender in the state (see Table 1), and the number of elementary school principals and assistant principals by race/ethnicity and gender at the study site (see Table 2). The numbers in Tables 1 and 2 were rounded to protect the anonymity of the state and the study site.

Table 1

The Number of Elementary School Administrators by Race and Gender in the State

Year	2022	2023	2024
Elementary school principals and assistant principals	1,600	1,630	1,610
African American male elementary school principals and assistant principals	80	80	75

As depicted in Table 1, in the state where this basic qualitative study was conducted, in the academic year 2022, of the approximately 1,600 state elementary school administrators, fewer than 80 were African American men. In the academic year 2023, of the approximately 1,630 state elementary school administrators, fewer than 80 were African American men. In the academic year 2024, of the approximately 1,610 state elementary school administrators, fewer than 75 were African American men.

Table 2

The Number of Elementary School Administrators by Race and Gender at the Study Site

Year	2022	2023	2024
Elementary school principals	110	110	110
African American male elementary school principals	0	1	1
Elementary school assistant principals	130	130	130
African American male elementary school assistant principals	3	5	5

At the study site (Table 2), in the academic year 2022, of the approximately 110 elementary school principals, there were no African American male elementary school principals. Also, in the academic year 2022, of the approximately 130 elementary school assistant principals, three were African American men. As depicted in Table 2, in the academic year 2023, of the approximately 110 elementary school principals, one was an African American male. Also, in the academic year 2023, of the approximately 130 elementary school assistant principals, three were African American men. As depicted in Table 2, in the academic year 2024, of the approximately 110 elementary school principals, one was an African American male. Also, in the academic year 2024, of the approximately 130 elementary school assistant principals, five were African American men.

Table 3*Percentages of Elementary School Teachers, Principals, and Assistant Principals*

Gender	Female	Male
Teachers	90%	10%
Principals	81%	19%
Assistant principals	85%	15%

As depicted in Table 3, more than 90% of elementary school teachers were female at the study site, and approximately 10% were male. Approximately 81% of elementary school principals were female, and approximately 19% of elementary school principals were male. Approximately 85% of elementary school assistant principals were female, and approximately 15% were male.

Table 4*Percentages of African American Elementary School Teachers, Principals, and Assistant Principals at the Study Site*

Gender	Female	Male
African American teachers	9%	1%
African American elementary school principals	8%	2%
African American elementary school assistant principals	8.5%	1.5%

As depicted in Table 4, at the study site, approximately 9% of the elementary school teachers were African American women, and 1% were African American men. Approximately 8% of the elementary school principals were African American women, and approximately 2% were African American men. Also, approximately 8.5% of elementary school assistant principals were African American women, and approximately 1.5% were African American men.

The gap in practice was the need to understand how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming elementary school principals. Aspiring principals transition from teachers to principals and have various school leadership roles, including assistant principals (Bastian & Drake, 2023). Senior district administrators and board members must support diverse leaders to become principals (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Principals are responsible for instructional leadership, and African American male elementary school principal aspirants need support from school district administrators to overcome barriers to becoming school principals (Chan et al., 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants understand the supports and barriers to becoming principals. The research questions asked African American male elementary school principal aspirants to describe and discuss the supports and barriers to becoming principals. A literature review revealed that aspiring principals need support from other school leaders for the path of principalship (Cece et al., 2022; Chan et al., 2022; Nava et al., 2024). Also, African American aspiring leaders are challenged with issues of racism in schools (Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023) due to systemic bias (Bastian & Drake, 2023). Furthermore, African American aspiring leaders who want to become principals are challenged with inequities and racial discrimination (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Lee & Mao, 2023). Racial inequity exists, and African American aspiring principals are not promoted to principals (Tran et al., 2023). A basic qualitative research design was used to conduct

one-on-one semistructured interviews to explore the participants' perceptions. Qualitative methods offer flexibility in research design, data collection, and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Qualitative research is utilized to better understand participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). A basic qualitative design incorporates semistructured interviews to explore participants' perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Research Question

The problem investigated is the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experience and understand supports and barriers related to becoming a principal. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants understand the supports and barriers to becoming principals. The research questions asked African American male elementary school principal aspirants to describe and discuss the supports and barriers to becoming principals. The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: What barriers do African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive in becoming principals?

RQ2: What supports do African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive as needed to become principals?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of instructional leadership was developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1986) and comprises leadership functions and processes. The leadership functions include (a) framing and communicating school goals, (b) supervising and evaluating instruction, (c) coordinating the school curriculum, (d) developing high

academic standards and expectations, (e) monitoring student progress, (f) promoting the professional development of teachers, (g) protecting instructional time, and (h) developing incentives for students and teachers (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). The leadership processes are (a) communication, (b) decision-making, (c) conflict management, (d) group process, (e) change process, and (f) environmental interaction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

The school principal is the school's instructional leader who can utilize skills in group processes because "the principal plays a key role in conceptualizing the school's goals and receiving input from educational stakeholders, such as teachers, parents/guardians, students, community, and government officials to develop and frame school goals" (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 6). The focus of instructional leaders is on student academic achievement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). The school principal's responsibilities are to "facilitate effective communication of the school's mission" and "effectively allocate school resources" by maintaining "consistency in the school's goals" (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 6). One of the roles of a school principal is that of a supervisor accountable for all school matters, especially classroom instruction, and is expected to work with teachers on classroom objectives, such as "lesson plans and student work products" connected to the school's mission by assisting teachers "in improving their instructional practices" (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 6).

"School principals are responsible for the monitoring of student progress" as measured by school and state tests to "assess the school's instructional programs" and to coordinate the curriculum to "assess school effectiveness" by protecting instructional

time, such as the reduction of absenteeism and truancy (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 8). Principals “allocate resources to instructional improvement activities” by “developing high standards and expectations” for classroom instructional practices (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 8). An important responsibility of the school principal is to provide incentives to students via honor rolls and award assemblies and incentives to teachers by honoring or recognizing their teaching accomplishments (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 8).

The instructional leadership framework was an appropriate conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive the pathway to the principalship in the district under study. Specifically, the research questions asked African American male elementary school principal aspirants how they perceive the supports and barriers to becoming principals, and the framework of instructional leadership was applied to conduct this study. The instructional leadership framework was used to develop the interview protocol (Appendix).

After IRB approval was received, the components of the instructional leadership framework were applied to analyze the interview transcripts for emergent themes. Specifically, the components of the framework of instructional leadership were used to code the interview transcripts to identify categories, subcategories, and emergent themes because principals, assistant principals, and aspirant principals were expected to engage in school functions, activities, practices, and procedures to define and communicate the school’s mission. School administrators were expected to communicate with teachers and

adhere to state and district policies and procedures. The key elements of the instructional leadership framework are explained further in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

A basic qualitative research design was applied because the phenomenon is the low number of African American male elementary school principals at the study site. This research design was selected because the one-on-one semistructured interviews with the participants were the only data source. This design was used to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive the supports and barriers to becoming principals. Qualitative researchers use qualitative methods, such as interviews, to provide a “thick description” to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 42). “Qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 4).

A qualitative researcher uses grounded theory to construct a theory (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019), and a theory was not developed in this study. Qualitative researchers use ethnography to study the behaviors, social interactions, or beliefs of groups of people over a long period of time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Also, ethnography is used to study an entire cultural group (Yin, 2009), so it was not selected as a research method for this study. Phenomenology was not selected because this research design does not align with the purpose statement.

Purposive sampling was used to interview nine participants to understand the study’s phenomenon. A detailed description of the participants’ responses was provided

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One-on-one semistructured interviews were appropriate for this qualitative study because the research phenomenon required qualitative data to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. Grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, and quantitative research were not selected. Quantitative data, such as state test scores, were not collected to examine the effect of the participants' leadership practices on state test scores.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following key terms were used in this basic qualitative study:

African American: A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (Bass, 2020; Clarida, 2023).

Culturally responsive school leadership: A framework for school leaders to improve schools by addressing educational inequities (Gooden et al., 2023).

Instructional leadership competencies: Principals engage in school functions, activities, practices, and procedures (Brandmo et al., 2021; Yaacob & Ishak, 2023).

Instructional leadership functions: (a) framing and communicating school goals, (b) supervising and evaluating instruction, (c) coordinating the school curriculum, (d) developing high academic standards and expectations, (e) monitoring student progress, (f) promoting the professional development of teachers, (g) protecting instructional time, and (h) developing incentives for students and teachers (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

Instructional leadership processes: (a) communication, (b) decision making, (c) conflict management, (d) group process, (e) change process, and (f) environmental interaction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

Principal aspirant: An individual aiming to become a state-certified educator who leads a K-12 school (Legget & Smith, 2022).

Socially and culturally responsive leaders: K-12 school leaders are socially and culturally responsive by addressing school and societal issues and respecting and appreciating diversity and inclusion (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024).

Assumptions

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2015), an assumption is “a condition that is taken for granted without which the research would be pointless” (p. 23). This study’s assumption was that elementary school principal aspirants who agreed to participate would be truthful and candid about how they perceived the supports and barriers to becoming school principals. This assumption was critical to the study because the principal aspirants’ perceptions formed the qualitative data that were analyzed to answer the research questions. Another assumption was that participants had experience in the study’s phenomenon and were able to participate in one-on-one interviews.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this basic qualitative study was one public school district in the Middle Atlantic region of the United States. The Middle Atlantic region was chosen because of the low number of African American male principals at the elementary school level. The population included in the study was African American male educators who

were state certified to be administrators and planned to become elementary school principals. The populations excluded from the study were principal aspirants who were not African American men, principal aspirants who did not aim to be elementary school principals, and principal aspirants who were not state certified to be administrators. The delimitation of this study included only African American male educators who were state certified to be administrators and aimed to be elementary school principals. This delimitation set the boundary of the study group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Limitations

One limitation of the study was the low number of African American male elementary school teachers at the study site. To overcome this limitation, the invitation stated appreciation for the recipients' consideration to participate in the study and help the researcher understand the recipients' experiences related to the study's phenomenon. A second limitation was the restricted availability of interviews for potential participants. To overcome the second limitation, the invitation to potential participants indicated that a broad range of days and hours was available for the interviews.

Significance

The low number of African American male elementary school principals was explored. Applying a basic qualitative research design explored how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming elementary school principals at the study site. By interviewing 9 African American male elementary school principal aspirants who were state-certified to be

administrators and employed at the study site for at least 3 years, the findings included new information on the supports and barriers to becoming principals at the study site.

The findings may encourage African American male elementary school principal aspirants to apply for the principalship. Also, the findings may provide current school principals and senior school district administrators with new information to support African American male elementary school principal aspirants to become principals. Furthermore, the findings may provide senior school district administrators with new information to remove the hiring barriers for African American male elementary school principal aspirants. The findings may lead to further research concerning ways to help African American male elementary school principal aspirants become principals. The study's findings may contribute to positive social change through new ways for public school district administrators and school principals to support African American male elementary school principal aspirants to become principals.

Summary

The problem to be investigated was the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experienced and understood supports and barriers related to becoming a principal. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants understood the supports and barriers to becoming principals. The research questions asked African American male elementary school principal aspirants to describe and discuss the supports and barriers to becoming principals. Principals are responsible for instructional leadership, and African American male elementary school principal aspirants need

support from school district administrators to overcome barriers to becoming school principals (Chan et al., 2022). Aspiring principals need to learn from other school leaders, interact in the educational process with educational stakeholders, and engage in instructional leadership for the path of principalship (Chan et al., 2022; Nava et al., 2024).

The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: What barriers do African American male elementary school principal aspirants identify?

RQ2: What supports do African American male elementary school principal aspirants describe as needed to become principals?

The conceptual framework of instructional leadership was developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1986) and comprises leadership functions and processes. A basic qualitative research design was applied because the phenomenon was the low number of African American male elementary school principals at the study site. This research design was selected because the one-on-one semistructured interviews with the participants were the only data source. To understand the phenomenon of the study, purposive sampling was employed to interview nine participants. The findings of the study may contribute towards an increase in the number of African American elementary school principals. Chapter 2 includes the conceptual framework and a detailed review of the literature related to key concepts of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem investigated is the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experience and understand supports and barriers related to becoming a principal. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive the supports and barriers to becoming principals. This chapter examines the research applicable to the pathway to the principalship for African American male elementary school principal aspirants. Researchers suggested hiring diverse school leaders with historical and community knowledge to align with the school district's community and sensitivity to issues in the community they serve (Gooden et al., 2023). The path to principalship is not equitable, and there is a lack of diversity among school leaders (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Systemic leadership inequities continue to exist in schools and school districts in the United States (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). School districts find it difficult to recruit diverse principals, and fewer racial minority educational leaders become school principals (Lee & Mao, 2023). The principal pathway is challenging for African American educators who want to become school principals because of inequities and racial discrimination (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024; Bastian & Drake, 2023). School districts must offer aspiring leadership programs for the path to principalship (Tran et al., 2023). Thus, senior school district administrators must address racial problems (Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023).

The number of diverse leaders is low in diverse schools (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024). The number of K-12 African American school leaders is approximately 11%

(Williams, 2024). Less than 30% of African American educators attend principal preparation programs due to systemic bias (Bastian & Drake, 2023). This underrepresentation underscores the need to increase diversity in school leadership and ensure equitable opportunities for aspiring leaders.

Senior district administrators and board members must support diverse leaders to become principals (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). School district administrators must support African American male elementary school principal aspirants by helping these candidates learn leadership from principals and district leaders (Chan et al., 2022). Principals are responsible for instructional leadership, and African American male elementary school principal aspirants need support from school district administrators to overcome barriers to becoming school principals (Chan et al., 2022). Aspiring principals transition from teachers to principals and have various school leadership roles, including assistant principals (Bastian & Drake, 2023).

Little literature exists regarding the time it takes a teacher who is a state-certified administrator to become a principal (Deaver, 2023). “Nationally, 80% of all school principals are White, 10% are African American, 7% are Latino, and 3% represent Other Races” (Cheung & Gong, 2022, p. 113). The number of diverse school leaders has remained the same for over 20 years (Lee & Mao, 2023; Taie & Lewis, 2022).

In Chapter 2, the literature review search strategy included various library databases using search key terms. In this literature review, the conceptual framework of instructional leadership was explored, followed by a review of the broader problem of principals’ instructional leadership, the roles of principals as school leaders, diverse

school leaders, educational inequities, the low number of African American male leaders, race and gender and promotion to school leadership, principal preparation programs, mentoring of African American principals, school leaders building professional relationships with colleagues, difficulties in recruiting and retaining diverse principals, and challenges of aspiring principals. The chapter concludes with a summary and a transition to Chapter 3.

Literature Search Strategy

The online databases of Walden University, ProQuest, ERIC, Google Scholar, and SAGE were used to find research within the last 5 years. The following key terms were used for peer-reviewed articles: *African American male principal aspirants, African American male assistant principals, African American male principals, the number of African American male school administrators, African American male state-certified administrators, supports African American male principal aspirants perceive are needed, becoming school principals, becoming assistant principals, barriers in becoming school principals, barriers in becoming assistant principals, hiring male assistant principals, hiring male principals, the pathway to a principalship, principal preparation programs, African American school district administrators, culturally responsive leaders, school leaders, and aspiring African American educators who want to become principals*. The reference sections of dissertations were searched on related topics using the ProQuest database to find more research. Quantitative studies were included in the search, and peer-reviewed articles that used participant interviews were reviewed. Each article was relevant to this research.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was instructional leadership, which was developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1986) and comprises leadership functions and processes. The leadership functions include: (a) framing and communicating school goals, (b) supervising and evaluating instruction, (c) coordinating the school curriculum, (d) developing high academic standards and expectations, (e) monitoring student progress, (f) promoting the professional development of teachers, (g) protecting instructional time, and (h) developing incentives for students and teachers (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). The leadership processes are (a) communication, (b) decision-making, (c) conflict management, (d) group process, (e) change process, and (f) environmental interaction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

Communication is a leadership process and a skill needed for the school principal to create “productive and working relationships with teachers and staff via face-to-face communications in order to communicate the school’s mission regarding the curriculum and instruction” (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 9). Also, principals implement collaborative organizational decision-making processes to develop schoolwide policies that support effective classroom instruction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

When implementing conflict management processes, the school principal should have the skills to “recognize the varying concerns of different groups of stakeholders,” such as students, community, researchers, and so forth (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 9). “Conflict is an inevitable consequence of the process of building a more effective school” (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 10). Hallinger and Murphy (1986) noted that the “ability

to manage conflict so that group cohesion is enhanced, and school norms develop which support the attainment of school-wide goals is critical for principals interested in instructional improvement” (p. 10).

When implementing group processes, “principals should promote a feeling of freedom of group members to make contributions and suggestions and of rough equality of participation with each other” (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 11). Additionally, principals should ensure that group processes lead to an evident outcome. Another process of the instructional leadership framework is that the change process may occur based on collegiality and collaboration among teachers and the principal. For example, the school principal needs skills for major changes in the school curriculum and instruction to be successfully implemented with input from the education stakeholders (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 10).

The final process of the instructional leadership framework is environmental interaction between the school principal and the education stakeholders because the principal is expected to “mediate environmental expectations and incorporate them into the school’s program” (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 12). The role of the principal is to obtain input from the school community to meet the expectations of parents, the community, and the district office to define and communicate the school’s mission (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

The instructional leadership framework has also been linked to school outcomes. It is principal-centered because principals are expected to have leadership competencies in engaging in school functions, activities, practices, and procedures (Brandmo et al.,

2021). Principals' leadership competencies apply in a school setting to improve student outcomes by developing and implementing a school vision (Bukko et al., 2021).

Grant and Drew (2022) stated that school leaders affect student achievement because their competencies influence school processes. Specifically, "instructional leadership focuses on improving student learning by improving curriculum, instruction, and assessment" (Grant & Drew, 2022, p. 140). Instructional leadership "links school leadership and student learning," and "the principal's role in instructional leadership is crucial to school effectiveness" (Xia & O'Shea, 2023, p. 965). According to Cox and Mullen (2023), principals affect student achievement and influence the school's mission by inspiring school stakeholders to support the school's goals and focusing on quality instruction. Instructional leadership of principals involves modeling "instructional dialogue and meaningful supervision" in schools (Cox & Mullen, 2023, p. 10).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

The literature review includes topics on principals' instructional leadership, the roles of principals as school leaders, diverse school leaders, educational inequities, the low number of African American male leaders, race and gender and promotion to school leadership, principal preparation programs, mentoring of African American principals, school leaders building professional relationships with colleagues, difficulties in recruiting and retaining diverse principals, and challenges of aspiring principals. Instructional leaders focus on school outcomes and implement the school's mission and vision (Brandmo et al., 2021). Influential instructional leaders apply leadership competencies to improve school outcomes (Bukko et al., 2021), such as curriculum,

instruction, and student achievement (Grant & Drew, 2022). School leaders apply leadership practices to manage instructional programs and support education stakeholders because they influence the school's mission by inspiring education stakeholders to support the school's goals to improve teaching and learning (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Xia & O'Shea, 2023; Yaacob & Ishak, 2023).

Influential leaders apply instructional leadership to support aspiring leaders and diverse teams of teachers to share leadership (Chan et al., 2022). African American aspiring school administrators support culturally relevant instruction (Williams, 2024). School district administrators should be hiring equity-centered, diverse school administrators (Perrone, 2022) and should be racially and ethnically conscious leaders (Gustafson et al., 2021). School district administrators should also support aspiring leaders by appreciating diversity and inclusion (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). The school district environment should be equitable to address inequities in hiring diverse educators (Gooden et al., 2023; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Nava et al., 2024).

There is an underrepresentation of diverse administrators (Edwards & Anderson, 2023; Lee & Mao, 2023), and the number of African American aspiring school administrators is low (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022; Williams, 2024). School district administrators should acknowledge that African American male school administrators are caring leaders who promote equity and create inclusive schools (Bass, 2020; Smith, 2021). African American male aspiring school administrators face challenges because of inequities and racial discrimination (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024; Bastian & Drake, 2023). African American aspiring school administrators face challenges

being promoted to principals because the path to principalship is inequitable (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023; Tran et al., 2023).

African American aspiring administrators face challenges to principalship due to a lack of opportunities for growth and advancement (Deaver, 2023; Nava et al., 2024), and African American aspiring administrators benefit from mentoring (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Jones, 2024; Terosky et al., 2023). District administrators should focus on hiring diverse administrators and provide support to those administrators via mentoring (Edwards & Anderson, 2023; Gooden et al., 2023; Lee & Mao, 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022).

The number of diverse school leaders has remained the same for over 20 years (Lee & Mao, 2023; Taie & Lewis, 2022). The percentage of African American school leaders is approximately 11% in K-12 schools (Williams, 2024). “Nationally, 80% of all school principals are White, 10% are African American, 7% are Latino, and 3% represent Other Races” (Cheung & Gong, 2022, p. 113).

Aspiring principals are instructional leaders who can prepare for principalship by developing equity-oriented skills to create positive school climates (Nava et al., 2024). Aspiring principals need to learn from other school leaders, interact in the educational process with educational stakeholders, and engage in instructional leadership for the path of principalship (Chan et al., 2022; Nava et al., 2024). Aspiring school leaders may complete a principal preparation program designed to address issues of racism in schools by promoting equity, inclusion, and equal access to diverse students (Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023). In most principal preparation programs, less than 30% of African

American candidates have graduated; systemic bias against African American candidates has been identified as contributing to this graduation rate (Bastian & Drake, 2023). The school principal pathway is challenging for African American educators who want to become school principals because of inequities and racial discrimination (Bastian & Drake, 2023).

Teachers become aspiring school leaders when they are supported and valued by their respective principals (Edwards & Anderson, 2023). Little literature exists regarding the time it takes a teacher who is a state-certified administrator to become a principal (Deaver, 2023). Edwards and Anderson (2023) recommended that school district leaders apply strategic recruitment to hire diverse principals. The perceptions of K-12 principals regarding “their roles and daily responsibilities in schools differ because of their racial backgrounds” (Chan et al., 2022, p. 82).

Principal’s Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is principal-centered and linked to school outcomes (Brandmo et al., 2021). Instructional leadership competencies include the school’s mission and vision (Brandmo et al., 2021). As reflected in the school’s mission and vision, instructional leaders engage education stakeholders in school functions, activities, practices, and procedures (Brandmo et al., 2021).

Principals must have leadership competencies to be effective school leaders (Bukko et al., 2021). Improving student outcomes is an example of an instructional leadership competency where the principal implements the school’s mission by working with education stakeholders (Bukko et al., 2021). Senior district administrators hire

principals who demonstrate instructional leadership competencies to apply in a school setting to improve student outcomes by developing and implementing a school vision (Bukko et al., 2021).

Principals are expected to apply instructional leadership to school processes. Researchers found that school leaders' instructional leadership affects student achievement as measured by state tests (Grant & Drew, 2022). For example, principals' instructional leadership influences school processes, such as curriculum, instruction, and student achievement (Grant & Drew, 2022). Researchers have also found that school leaders' instructional leadership links school leadership and student learning (Xia & O'Shea, 2023). Instructional leadership is crucial to school effectiveness because principals define the schools' visions and missions and manage instructional programs (Xia & O'Shea, 2023). Principals apply instructional leadership as change agents to support education stakeholders (Xia & O'Shea, 2023).

Researchers who examined school leaders' instructional leadership reported that principals affect student achievement and influence the school's mission (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Yaacob & Ishak, 2023). Specifically, principals must apply instructional leadership to inspire education stakeholders to support the schools' goals (Cox & Mullen, 2023). Principals must also apply their instructional leadership competencies to focus on quality instruction (Cox & Mullen, 2023). For instance, principals must have instructional leadership skills to improve teaching and learning (Cox & Mullen, 2023).

District and school administrators "influence learning outcomes" (Munna, 2023, p. 39). School administrators apply instructional leadership to promote aspiring

administrators' professional development to improve student learning outcomes (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). Effective school administrators apply instructional leadership practices to promote "a clear and shared vision, providing support and resources, and monitoring and evaluating teacher performance" (Kilag & Sasan, 2023, p. 64).

Principals' Roles as School Leaders

Effective leaders apply instructional leadership (Chan et al., 2022). Chan et al. (2022) examined school principals' perceptions as leaders via interviews. "Variation in principals' perceptions of injustice could vary among different racial and ethnic groups" and "comparing the perceptions of injustice, White Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans differ significantly because of the different racial and ethnic environments in which they are situated" (Chan et al., 2022, p. 86). Elementary school principals learn from other school leaders, interact in the educational process with educational stakeholders, and engage in instructional leadership and school activities (Chan et al., 2022). Principals learn from other school leaders and should support aspiring leaders on their faculty to share leadership (Chan et al., 2022). Elementary school teachers could learn from principals how to apply instructional leadership to become principals (Chan et al., 2022).

Principals apply leadership practices to focus on teaching and learning and enhance school culture (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023, p. 521). "Effective principals are instrumental in attracting, supporting, and retaining high-quality teachers by supporting and sustaining school environments that positively affect school outcomes" (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023, p. 522). The role of the principal is to support teaching

and learning and to provide opportunities to stakeholders “to work together to solve problems, to provide feedback and information, and to assist and support” (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023, p. 521). Another role of the principal is to “engage teachers in the process of continuous learning and fostering school climates that support teacher learning and development” (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023, p. 529). Thus, support via mentoring is to exchange ideas and share knowledge (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023).

Diverse School Leaders

According to Williams (2024), the likelihood of African American student school success increases when these students interact with African American school leaders and regularly attend school, feel cared for by the school staff, and enroll in colleges. African American school leaders positively affect African American students because these leaders help students improve academic development through student empowerment, support, and culturally relevant instruction (Williams, 2024).

Researchers found a lack of diverse school leaders with historical and community knowledge to align with the school district’s community (Gooden et al., 2023). School district administrators should hire equity-centered principals (Gooden et al., 2023). Diverse students benefit from diverse school leaders (Perrone, 2022).

According to Gustafson et al. (2021), principal leadership affects student academic achievement. Leadership ensures an equitable and optimal learning environment inclusive of diversity, race, and gender (Gustafson et al., 2021). Gustafson et al. (2021) reported gaps in preparing, licensing, and hiring school principals. They

recommended that school principalship programs include leadership practices for school leaders to be racially and ethnically conscious (Gustafson et al., 2021).

Educational Inequities

A school district should have a plan to focus on equity and implement equity-based district policies by supporting stakeholders to implement the school district vision (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Senior school district leaders and school board members should support aspiring leaders by appreciating diversity and inclusion (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). According to Mansfield and Lambrinou (2024), school leaders should be able to address inequities in hiring diverse educators. Leadership practices should be applied to seek input from educational stakeholders to involve them in decision-making processes to embrace diversity (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024).

According to Smith (2021), little research exists on race-discriminatory environments. Smith (2021) interviewed 14 school leaders and suggested that school districts should enact strategies to support school leaders. Bass (2020) interviewed 10 administrators and reported that African American male school leaders created a learning environment because of their caring leadership. Bass (2020) recommended that educational senior administrators inspire and train caring school administrators from all backgrounds by acknowledging that African American male school leaders care about schools, students, and the communities they serve. African American male school leaders “support students through leadership” (Smith, 2021, p. 43). African American school leaders promote equity and create inclusive schools (Bass, 2020).

African American school leaders understand the culture and background of African American students and create culturally responsive instruction (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024). Most school principals start their careers as teachers and have various leadership roles in the schools, including the role of assistant school principal; however, the school principal pathway is challenging for African American educators who want to become school principals because of inequities and racial discrimination (Bastian & Drake, 2023). Antonetti and Sauers (2024) examined “how school leaders affected the self-efficacy of African American male teachers who attended an alternative certification program” in recruiting and maintaining diverse faculty members by collecting data via one-on-one interviews (p. 685).

Grooms et al. (2024) stated that equity is crucial to leadership practice. Aspiring principals are instructional leaders who can prepare for principalship by developing equity-oriented skills to create positive school climates (Grooms et al., 2024). District leaders should address educational inequities and be more representative of student demographics by applying leadership practices and creating equitable environments to support aspiring principals (Grooms et al., 2024). District leaders should also understand “how equity can and should be a central component of leadership practice for all school leaders” (Grooms et al., 2024, p. 10).

Low Number of African American Male School Leaders

Senior district administrators have reported a low number of African American male administrators (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022). Williams (2024) wrote that the number of African American school leaders is low. Approximately

11% of school leaders are African American because they lack adequate or accessible mentorship opportunities (Williams, 2024). Like the findings of Williams (2024), Ellis Bowen (2020) wrote that the percentage of African American principals is 9%.

Race and Gender and Promotion to School Leadership

Researchers have studied the pathways to principalship and revealed little about the influences of race or ethnicity and gender (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Edwards & Anderson, 2023; Lee & Mao, 2023; Taie & Lewis, 2022; Tran et al., 2023). Researchers reported that there is an underrepresentation of minority educators in principal positions because of gender stereotyping and discrimination (Lee & Mao, 2023). Researchers also reported little research on the hiring practices of aspiring leaders and recommended further research on the path to principalship. Edwards and Anderson (2023) recommended more qualitative research on how diverse educators are embedded and invested in the education field because there is evidence of discriminatory barriers for diverse teachers to seek promotions into leadership positions, such as becoming school principals.

Diverse school leaders benefit underrepresented and historically underserved students because diverse leaders support teachers and advocate culturally responsive practices (Tran et al., 2023). African American aspiring principals are not promoted to principals (Tran et al., 2023). Bailes and Guthery (2020) conducted a quantitative study and stated that “race and gender are associated with the promotion to school leadership” (p. 3). The path to principalship is inequitable, and school principal demographics are changing more regarding gender than race (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). There is a lack of

diversity among school leaders, and the hiring processes of school district human resources managers are influenced by their race; specifically, White managers hire more White candidates (Bailes & Guthery, 2020).

Rasmussen and Raskin (2023) examined “the racial identity development of African American and White men who were aspiring school leaders and completed a principal preparation program designed to address issues of racism in schools by promoting equity, inclusion, and equal access to diverse students” (p. 230). According to Rasmussen and Raskin (2023), “school leaders must understand racial, ethnic, and cultural issues” by leading schools with racial competence (p. 230).

Grace and Lastrapes (2024) conducted a qualitative study, interviewed 19 school administrators, and found that the participants fear discussing race. Grace and Lastrapes (2024) wrote that African American participants talk about race in the school districts, and White participants “acknowledge a gap in awareness and knowledge” (p. 191). District and school administrators are uncomfortable discussing and addressing racism; however, “a certain level of comfort with discussing matters of race are basic requirements to advocate for racial equity” (Grace & Lastrapes, 2024, p. 191). District and school administrators should be aware of the roles of race (Grace & Lastrapes, 2024).

Principal Preparation Programs

Principal preparation programs focus on mentorship and are taught by experienced school principals to help aspiring educators transition from being teachers to becoming school principals (Bastian & Drake, 2023). Less than 30% of African American educators attend principal preparation programs due to systemic bias (Bastian

& Drake, 2023). Senior school district administrators, such as superintendents and executive administrators, interview school principal candidates and select personnel; however, racial inequity exists (Tran et al., 2023). African American aspiring principals are not promoted to principals, although they participated in principal preparation programs (Tran et al., 2023).

Mentoring of African American Principals

The literature review revealed the need for effective mentoring for African American principals, knowing that 9% to 10% are African American (Jones, 2024). Ellis Bowen (2020) found that African American leaders benefit from mentoring. According to Bastian and Drake (2023), principal mentoring is an important component of principal preparation.

Mentoring in public schools is a one-on-one approach where the mentor works with the mentee to focus on the leadership role and developing leadership skills (Brandmo et al., 2021). Brandmo et al. (2021) noted that mentoring helps mentees maximize their performance for individual and organizational goals. Brandmo et al. (2021) also stated that mentoring with diverse leaders is “meaningful and important to the participants” and supports “cultural change in the organization” (p. 206).

District administrators should focus on improving the leadership of African American principals (Jones, 2024). District administrators should apply instructional leadership practices to focus on mentoring to promote aspiring administrators’ professional growth and development (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). School administrators should apply instructional leadership practices emphasizing “collaboration, reflection,

and shared decision-making” to support aspiring administrators (Kilag & Sasan, 2023, p. 64). Mentoring aspiring administrators should focus on “providing support” by “setting clear goals and expectations for professional development (Kilag & Sasan, 2023, p. 67).

Instructional leadership is a top-down approach for district and school administrators to guide aspiring administrators to achieve the district’s goals through mentoring (Munna, 2023). District and school administrators can support aspiring administrators to develop leadership skills by promoting a positive mentoring environment (Munna, 2023). According to Munna (2023), administrators can apply instructional leadership “to establish a shared belief around the learning and can improve the learner’s achievement” (p. 50).

School Leaders Building Professional Relationships with Colleagues

Researchers found that school leaders should build professional relationships with colleagues (Jones, 2024; Terosky et al., 2023). Jones (2024) explored the strategies African American principal supervisors applied to develop African American principals professionally and collected data via virtual one-on-one interviews with 11 participants. In Jones’ (2024) study, African American principal supervisors said they focus on supporting African American principals to build professional relationships and improve leadership via mentoring. African American principal supervisors should also focus on improving African American principals’ leadership via mentoring (Jones, 2024). The literature review revealed the need for effective mentoring for African American principals (Jones, 2024). Jones (2024) recommended the development of African American aspiring principals. According to Terosky et al. (2023), school leaders affect

learning and teaching. Senior district leaders are not supporting diverse leadership (Terosky et al., 2023). The vitality of school leaders is enhanced when they spend time on leadership with colleagues (Terosky et al., 2023).

Cece et al. (2022) explored the role of support from principals and found that support from principals was positively associated with pedagogical and subject matter expertise. Aspiring administrators “need the support of their principals during the school year” (Cece et al., 2022, p. 4). The role of the principal is instructional leader and is significant in the development of aspiring administrators (Cece et al., 2022). “The support from principals is associated with the level of teacher professional development” (Cece et al., 2022, p. 12). Cece et al. (2022) recommended the implementation of support, “highlighting the benefits of social support and providing strategies to offer choices or boost teacher confidence” (p. 14).

Difficulties in Recruiting and Retaining Diverse Principals

Researchers suggested hiring diverse school leaders (Gooden et al., 2023). Leaders with historical and community knowledge aligned with the school district’s vision and mission are needed to meet the needs of the community they serve (Gooden et al., 2023). District leaders should apply strategic recruitment to hire diverse school principals (Edwards & Anderson, 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022); however, there are difficulties in recruiting principals to serve racially and ethnically diverse students (Lee & Mao, 2023). White teachers have more chances of becoming principals than African American teachers (Lee & Mao, 2023).

School districts are finding it difficult to recruit principals, and fewer racial minority educational leaders become school principals (Lee & Mao, 2023). Lee and Mao (2023) examined the characteristics of candidates who want to become principals and the characteristics of leaders who interview the candidates. Fewer principal candidates want to become principals in diverse schools (Lee & Mao, 2023).

According to Edwards and Anderson (2023), diverse teachers trust their diverse principals more because they create a supportive working environment for diverse teachers who later follow the path to principalship. African American teachers became aspiring school leaders because their diverse principals supported and valued them (Edwards & Anderson, 2023). Edwards and Anderson (2023) recommended that school district leaders apply strategic recruitment and hiring of diverse school principals for schools where they are most needed to meet the needs of diverse students. Diverse students benefit from diverse educators (Edwards & Anderson, 2023).

Challenges of Aspiring Principals

Aspiring principals are instructional leaders ready for the path of principalship because they have developed equity-oriented skills (Nava et al., 2024). Deaver (2023) explored the pathways to principalship and found that one of the challenges to principalship is opportunities for growth and advancement. Little literature exists regarding the time it takes a teacher who is a state-certified administrator to become a principal due to the challenges on the path to principalship (Deaver, 2023).

Aspiring school administrators express confidence in their administrative skills but face challenges developing the skills needed for a leadership role (Lash et al., 2024).

Aspiring school administrators noted support from senior administrators for growth and advancement (Lash et al., 2024). According to Lash et al. (2024), aspiring school administrators prefer learning-leadership orientation from senior school administrators.

Aspiring school administrators said that the challenge for the path to principalship is the creation of a professional partnership with senior school administrators (Rangel et al., 2024). Aspiring school administrators express the need to spend time with senior administrators on instructional leadership growth. Rangel et al. (2024) recommended that “districts work with state agencies, foundations, nonprofits, and universities to create and support full-time residency programs for aspiring school leaders” (p. 336).

Summary and Conclusions

School principals engage in functions, activities, practices, and procedures as evidence of their instructional leadership competencies. Influential leaders apply instructional leadership to support aspiring leaders and diverse teams of teachers in sharing leadership. However, the path to principalship is inequitable, with African American principal aspirants not receiving the mentorship and professional development they need to become principals. Researchers have reported discriminatory barriers that have resulted in the underrepresentation of diverse school principals. However, little has been reported on the influence that race or ethnicity and gender have on the pathways to principalship. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature on addressing the low number of African American male principals at the elementary school level. This study aimed to address this gap by reporting on African American male elementary principal aspirants’

perceptions of the supports and barriers they encountered on their pathways to the principalship.

This study collected qualitative data from the participants during one-on-one semistructured interviews. The data were analyzed to develop themes that filled the gap in the literature on the low number of African American male elementary school principals. Chapter 3 highlights the research methodology, design, instrumentation, and trustworthiness issues.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem investigated was the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experienced and understood supports and barriers related to becoming a principal. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. A basic qualitative research design was applied because the phenomenon was the low number of African American male elementary school principals at the study site. This research design was selected because the one-on-one semistructured interviews with the participants were the only data source.

The gap in literature identified in this study was the low number of African American male elementary school principal aspirants at the study site. Senior district administrators had reported a low number of African American male administrators (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022). Williams (2024) wrote that the number of African American school leaders is low. Approximately 11% of school leaders are African American because they lack adequate or accessible mentorship opportunities (Williams, 2024). Like the findings of Williams (2024), Ellis Bowen (2020) wrote that the percentage of African American principals is 9%, highlighting the continued underrepresentation of African American educators in leadership roles within schools. Despite efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in educational leadership, the low percentage of African American principals remains a significant concern, suggesting that systemic barriers to advancement persist (Bastian & Drake, 2023). Chapter 3 describes participant selection criteria and other aspects of the research design and rationale,

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Participant confidentiality, ethical considerations, and data collection and analysis are also presented.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: What barriers do African American male elementary school principal aspirants identify in becoming principals?

RQ2: What supports do African American male elementary school principal aspirants describe as needed to become principals?

A basic qualitative research design was applied because the phenomenon was the low number of African American male elementary school principals at the study site. This research design was selected because the one-on-one semistructured interviews with the participants were the only data source. This design was used to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. Qualitative methods offer flexibility in research design, data collection, and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Qualitative research is utilized to better understand participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). A basic qualitative design incorporates semistructured interviews to explore participants' perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative researchers use qualitative methods, such as interviews, to provide a "thick description" to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 42). "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 4).

Grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, and quantitative research were not selected. Quantitative data, such as state test scores, were not collected to examine the effect of the participants' leadership practices on state test scores. Qualitative researchers use ethnography to study the behaviors, social interactions, or beliefs of groups of people over a long period of time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Ethnography is used to study an entire cultural group (Yin, 2009) and was not selected as a research method for this study. Phenomenology was not selected because this research design does not align with the purpose statement. A qualitative researcher uses grounded theory to construct a theory (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019), and a theory was not developed in this study.

One-on-one semistructured interviews were appropriate for this qualitative study because the research phenomenon required qualitative data to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. A detailed description of the participants' responses was provided (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Purposive sampling was used to interview between 8 and 12 participants to understand the study's phenomenon. A detailed description of the participants' responses was provided (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study was that of a novice qualitative researcher and observer. I had not been a school principal or assistant principal. None of the employees I supervised were participants in the study. During the interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, professionalism was maintained to ensure that each participant was

comfortable answering the interview questions. To minimize researcher bias, all ethical research standards set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University and the study site were followed. A reflexivity journal was maintained to record my predispositions. Professional participant-researcher relationships were developed with all the participants, and appreciation was expressed for their participation in the study. Each participant was allowed to decline to answer an interview question or withdraw from the study to ensure no harm to the participants.

Methodology

A basic qualitative research design was used because the one-on-one semistructured interviews with the participants were the only data source. This design was used to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. Qualitative methods offer flexibility to better understand participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). A basic qualitative design, such as interviews, is employed to provide a "thick description" to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 42).

One-on-one semistructured interviews were appropriate for this qualitative study because the research phenomenon required qualitative data to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. The study was conducted in a Middle Atlantic United States school district. Purposive sampling was used to interview between 8 and 12 participants to understand the study's phenomenon. Data were collected using semistructured interviews. The data were analyzed using open and axial coding and thematic analysis to

identify patterns, themes, and concepts to report the participants' perceptions of the supports and barriers to becoming elementary school principals. Finally, the study results were presented in relation to the conceptual framework of instructional leadership.

Participant Selection

The setting for this study was a public school district. Schools were designated as elementary, middle, and high. The school district served over 110,000 students, of which approximately 50,000 were elementary school students, 23,000 were middle school students, and 34,000 were high school students. About 40% of the students were African American, 30% were White, 16.9% were Hispanic/Latino, 7.2% were Asian, 5.3% were multiracial, 0.4% were American Indian, and 0.1% were Pacific Islander. The study site has approximately 110 elementary schools, 30 middle schools, and 20 high schools. Each school has one principal and between one and three assistant principals. The number of African American male elementary school principal aspirants is approximately 100.

The population of interest in this study included approximately 100 African American male elementary school principal aspirants. The target sample size was eight to 12 participants. Qualitative researchers may have small sample sizes (see Malterud et al., 2016; Patton, 2015), and a small sample size is acceptable in qualitative studies (see Creswell, 2021). A sample size "can be supported by suitable recruitment" (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1755). A sample size varies in qualitative studies, and a researcher can interview participants until no new data emerges from the interviews (see Creswell, 2021). The participants selected for interviews met the selection criteria and were knowledgeable of the research phenomenon.

Purposive sampling was used to interview nine participants from a school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. “Purposive sampling is used to select participants who meet certain selection criteria” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 42). The inclusion criteria were African American male elementary school teachers or counselors who had been employed at the study site for at least 3 years, aspired to be principals, and were certified to be administrators in the state where the study site was located. The exclusion criteria were African American male school principals, African American female school principals, and all other ethnicities who were administrators at the schools under study.

The Human Resources department at the study site had a list of administrators, their qualifications, and employment at the schools. The email addresses of school staff members were publicly available on the school websites at the study site, and they were used to invite participants. The email invitations included the consent form and information about the purpose of the research, the significance of the study, the interviews, and the request to reply to the email with the words “I consent.” Participants were contacted via email to schedule the Zoom conferences based on availability.

Instrumentation

An interview protocol contains interview questions guided by the research questions (Creswell, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009). Qualitative data are collected via audio-recorded interviews with the participants’ permission (Creswell, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Semistructured interviews are used to explore the participants’ thoughts (Creswell, 2021). Qualitative researchers maintain a

reflexivity journal to minimize researcher bias and reactivity (Creswell, 2021).

Qualitative researchers use member checks to verify the accuracy of the participants' responses (Motulsky, 2021; Yin, 2009).

Qualitative data from the participants were collected during one-on-one semistructured interviews. I was the data collection instrument, listening to the participants' answers and asking probing questions. The interview protocol had been derived from the conceptual framework (Appendix). Two retired African American male principals reviewed the open-ended interview questions for clarity, and the final interview questions were found in the Appendix based on their professional feedback.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

IRB approval was obtained (IRB # 05-07-25-114904) from the administrators responsible for research at the study site and Walden University before conducting participant interviews. Email addresses were publicly available on school websites at the study site. After compiling a list of potential participants' email addresses, I sent invitation emails. African American male elementary school principal aspirants who met the selection criteria and consented to participate were contacted via email to schedule Zoom interviews based on their availability at a convenient day and time.

The confidentiality of the participants and the study site was protected by using alphanumeric identifiers, such as P1, P2, ..., and P9, where P1 represented Interviewee #1 and P2 represented Interviewee #2. The full names of participants were not revealed in the findings. Interview transcripts, communication emails, consent forms, and my reflexivity journal were stored in my home office in password-protected folders on my

laptop. All study-related information was encrypted on the laptop and saved 5 five years as required by IRB. After 5 years, all electronic files, handwritten notes, and consent forms were shredded or securely deleted.

At the start of each interview, the study was introduced, and participants' questions were answered. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, with a professional participant-researcher relationship maintained throughout. To minimize researcher bias, a reflexivity journal was maintained to record my predispositions. Participants were reminded that their names would not be disclosed in the findings and that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study without consequences. Permission to record the interview was requested from each participant, and interviews were transcribed within 72 hours of completion. Participants were also asked to review their transcripts via email to verify the accuracy of their responses, as interview excerpts were planned for use in the findings.

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative data collected via interviews are transcribed to analyze the data (Creswell, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Data analysis is a process a researcher uses to understand the interview transcripts and extract valuable information (Creswell, 2021). Qualitative data analysis identifies common keywords, phrases, categories, subcategories, and themes to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009). Qualitative researchers may use Creswell's (2021) six steps of data analysis. Additionally, qualitative researchers use member checks to verify the accuracy of each participant's responses (Yin, 2009).

Microsoft Excel was used to organize the interview data, and open and axial coding were employed to identify and chart keywords and phrases. Common keywords and phrases were highlighted and grouped into categories and subcategories. This data analysis process was repeated until no new keywords, phrases, categories, or subcategories emerged. For consistency, the conceptual framework and literature review were also referenced to guide the identification of emergent themes. All participants were contacted via email to conduct member checks to verify my initial interpretations and related findings. After participants reviewed the findings, any requests for revisions were considered.

Discrepant Cases

A qualitative researcher should consider all interview data, search for discrepant cases, and report them in the findings (Yin, 2009). After IRB approval, the qualitative data were examined for discrepant cases. No discrepant cases were identified and not reported in the findings to enhance the credibility of the study. Participants shared important or divergent information during the interviews.

Trustworthiness

The research findings reflect the participants' responses to a research phenomenon (Creswell, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009). Trustworthiness is the degree of confidence in qualitative data (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). A qualitative researcher needs to ensure the quality of research (Yin, 2009).

The interview protocol has been developed and reviewed for clarity by two retired African American male principals. These professionals were not participants in the study

and had no direct association with it; they assisted by conducting an external audit. They had access only to deidentified data and my written materials. Trustworthiness in this study was established through interview transcription, member checks with participants, and maintaining a reflexivity journal to minimize researcher reactivity.

Credibility

Findings are presented using accurate data collected from the participants. Member checks were conducted with all participants to establish credibility. Additionally, two retired African American male principals, who previously reviewed the open-ended interview questions for clarity, assisted in conducting an external audit. Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of the study setting and outlines the data collection plan designed to ensure the study's credibility.

Transferability

Transferability is about describing how the findings may be transferred to other similar study settings (Creswell, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009). The study has been described in detail to support transferability. The findings include excerpts from the interview transcripts to support the themes. The findings are presented in Chapter 5 in detail.

Dependability

Dependability is established when a research process is audited and the findings are consistent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009). Chapters 1 and 3 provided detailed descriptions of the study to establish dependability. Future researchers willing to replicate this study may have similar findings using a similar

research methodology, context, and participant selection criteria. I present the details of my data analyses in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, findings are interpreted.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009), the findings must not be influenced by a researcher's experiences, perceptions, or biases. Confirmability was maintained by presenting accurate data derived from participant interviews. In Chapter 5, I provide an objective interpretation of the findings and detail efforts to minimize bias, including maintaining a reflexivity journal throughout the study.

Ethical Procedures

IRB approval was obtained from the research administrators at the study site and Walden University prior to conducting participant interviews. Potential participants' email addresses, which were publicly available on the school district's websites, were compiled into a list. Invitation emails were sent to African American male elementary school principal aspirants who met the selection criteria. Those who consented to participate were contacted via email to schedule Zoom interviews at convenient times.

To protect the identities of the participants and the study site, alphanumeric codes such as P1 ... P12 were used, where P1 represented Interviewee #1 and P12 represented Interviewee #12. Participant names were not disclosed in the findings. Descriptions of locations and demographics were generalized to avoid identification. All interview transcripts, correspondence, consent forms, and my reflexivity journal were securely stored in password-protected folders on my personal laptop in my home office. The data

are encrypted and will be retained for 5 years in accordance with IRB requirements, after which all electronic files and physical documents were permanently deleted or shredded.

At the start of each interview, the study purpose was explained, and participants had the opportunity to ask questions. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. A professional and respectful participant-researcher relationship was maintained throughout. To minimize researcher bias, I kept a reflexivity journal documenting my thoughts and assumptions. Participants were reminded that their identities would remain confidential and that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Permission to record the interviews was requested, and transcripts were prepared within 72 hours following each interview. Participants were then invited to review their transcripts via email to confirm accuracy before their data were included in the findings.

Summary

The research methods outlined in this chapter met the criteria for a basic qualitative study. This basic qualitative study explored how African American male elementary school principal aspirants identified the supports and barriers to becoming principals. One-on-one semistructured interviews were appropriate for this qualitative study because the research phenomenon required qualitative data to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. Purposive sampling was used to interview nine participants from the school district under study. The inclusion criteria were African American male elementary school teachers or counselors who had been employed at the study site for at

least 3 years, aspired to be principals, and were certified to be administrators in the state where the study site was located. Chapter 3 included a review of the qualitative research design, the role of the researcher, explanations of how the data were collected and analyzed, and assurances of the trustworthiness of the study. Chapter 4 outlines the results of the study as they relate to the research questions and includes a more in-depth description of the setting, data collection, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Results

The problem investigated was the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experienced and understood supports and barriers related to becoming a principal. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. A basic qualitative study was used to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants identified the supports and barriers to becoming principals. One-on-one semistructured interviews were appropriate for this qualitative study because the research phenomenon required qualitative data to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: What barriers do African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive in becoming principals?

RQ2: What supports do African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive as needed to become principals?

In Chapter 4, I present the setting of the study, data collection, and analysis of interview transcripts. I include excerpts from the transcripts in each theme. This chapter ends with evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

The research site was a public school district serving a diverse student population across its K–12 schools, which included approximately 110 elementary schools, 30 middle schools, and 20 high schools. With a total student enrollment of over 110,000, the

district served around 50,000 elementary school students, 23,000 middle school students, and 34,000 high school students. Despite the size of the student body, there was a noticeable lack of African American male principals at the elementary school level. This disparity was evident in the data presented in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4, which further highlighted the challenges of increasing diversity within school leadership. The research phenomenon of this basic qualitative dissertation was the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experienced and understood supports and barriers related to becoming a principal.

Participant Profiles

“Purposive sampling is used to select participants who meet certain selection criteria” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 42). Purposive sampling was used to select participants from a school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The inclusion criteria were African American male elementary school teachers or counselors who had been employed at the study site for at least 3 years, aspired to be principals, and were certified to be administrators in the state where the study site was located. The exclusion criteria were African American male school principals, African American female school principals, and all other ethnicities who were administrators at the schools under study.

I interviewed nine African American male educators who were state-certified to be administrators. All the participants had been employed for 3 years or more at the study site as teachers, school counselors, or community school facilitators at the elementary,

middle, or high school level. Table 5 displays the participants' profiles of work location and current position.

Table 5

Participants' Profiles of Work Location and Current Position

Participant	Work location	Position
P1	Middle school	Teacher
P2	Middle school	Teacher
P3	Central office	School facilitator
P4	Middle school	Counselor
P5	High school	Teacher
P6	Elementary school	Teacher
P7	Elementary school	Teacher
P8	Middle school	Teacher
P9	Elementary school	Teacher

Data Collection

IRB approval was obtained from the administrators responsible for research at the study site and Walden University before conducting participant interviews. Email addresses were publicly available on school websites at the study site. I sent invitation emails after compiling a list of potential participants' email addresses. African American male elementary school principal aspirants who met the selection criteria and consented to participate were contacted via email to schedule Zoom interviews based on their availability on a convenient day and time. The purpose statement and significance of the study were included in the email together with the informed consent form asking the participants to reply with "I consent" if they were interested in participating in the study.

Those who consented to participate were contacted to schedule the interviews on a convenient day and time. The study was introduced at the start of each interview, and

participants' questions were answered. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, with a professional participant-researcher relationship maintained throughout. A reflexivity journal was maintained to record my predispositions to minimize researcher bias. Participants were reminded that their names would not be disclosed in the findings and could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study without consequences. Permission to record the interview was requested from each participant, and interviews were transcribed within 72 hours of completion. Participants were also asked to review their transcripts via email to verify the accuracy of their responses, as interview excerpts were planned for use in the findings. Member checks were used with each participant to ensure the accuracy of the themes. The participants did not request revisions to the themes. In this chapter, excerpts from the participants' responses are included.

The confidentiality of the participants and the study site was protected by using alphanumeric identifiers, such as P1, P2, ..., and P9, where P1 represented the first participant and P9 represented the ninth participant. The full names of participants were not revealed in the findings. Interview transcripts, communication emails, consent forms, and my reflexivity journal were stored in my home office in password-protected folders on my laptop. All study-related information was encrypted on the laptop and will be saved for 5 years as required by the IRB. After 5 years, all electronic files, handwritten notes, and consent forms will be shredded or securely deleted.

Data Analysis

A qualitative researcher reads the interview transcripts (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Common keywords and phrases are identified and charted (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Open coding and axial coding are used to analyze interview transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Codes are used to identify categories and themes (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). All codes are grouped into categories to identify themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From the categories and subcategories, themes emerge (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Triangulation is applied to strengthen the validity of the research findings to mitigate individual biases and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study, ensuring that the themes identified were well-supported and reliable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Member checking is conducted to enhance the credibility of the interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This study employed a rigorous qualitative coding process to analyze interview transcripts and explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the pathway to the principalship. The data analysis followed the principles of open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis, all informed by Hallinger and Murphy's (1986) Instructional Leadership Framework, which provided a guiding lens for identifying and interpreting leadership practices, challenges, and processes in the data.

Open Coding

The first cycle of coding began with open coding. During this phase, I conducted a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts to identify meaningful statements, phrases, and keywords related to participants' experiences, perceptions, and insights.

Codes were generated inductively, based on what emerged from the data, rather than from preconceived categories. For example, statements like “I never had a mentor that looked like me” or “you always feel like you are representing everyone” were coded as *lack of identity-based mentorship* and *representation burden*. Phrases like “I spend most of my time on behavior management instead of instruction” were coded as *instructional time disruption* and *behavioral overload*. When participants mentioned initiatives like “working with parents,” “sending newsletters,” or “hosting events,” these were coded as *community engagement* and *stakeholder communication*. Each interview transcript generated codes, which were collected in a codebook and revisited iteratively to ensure consistency and clarity.

Axial Coding

After using open coding, I used axial coding to group related codes into categories based on conceptual similarities and their relationship to the instructional leadership framework. I also used axial coding for pattern recognition. Codes related to mentoring, peer support, and development were grouped under *support systems and leadership development*. Codes about racial bias, hiring challenges, and underrepresentation were merged into the category of *systemic barriers to leadership access*. Instructional leadership practices, curriculum planning, and data-informed decisions were categorized under *instructional leadership development and challenges*. During this phase, I continually referred to Hallinger and Murphy’s (1986) leadership functions, such as promoting teacher development, supervising instruction, and allocating instructional

time. Categories were aligned with leadership functions or processes, such as communication, decision-making, and monitoring student progress.

Thematic Development

The final analysis stage involved developing themes by synthesizing the axial categories. The themes reflect the research questions and the experiences of participants. The category of *systemic barriers to leadership access* was changed to the theme *barriers to educational leadership and representation*, highlighting racial inequities and isolation. The category *support systems and leadership development* became the theme *support systems, mentorship, and leadership development*, focusing on how relationships and mentorship structures influence leadership preparation. The category *instructional leadership development and challenges* changed to the theme *instructional leadership: challenges, commitment, and development*.

The themes were processed by comparing them across participants using the constant comparison method, ensuring saturation, and verifying alignment with the conceptual framework. Each theme addresses one or more of the instructional leadership dimensions outlined by Hallinger and Murphy (1986), such as promoting professional development, communicating school goals, or managing instructional time. This coding process was used to create rich descriptions of the themes of the support and challenges faced by African American male principal aspirants. The instructional leadership framework was applied as a conceptual guide and an interpretive lens to place participants' experiences within broader leadership functions and systemic structures. The visual coding matrix is depicted in Table 6. The coding matrix (Table 6) represents

10 themes. The relevant categories, example keywords, and phrases from the data in each paragraph are presented, and how they connect to Hallinger and Murphy's (1986)

Instructional Leadership Framework components.

Table 6

Visual Coding Matrix

Theme	Categories
1. Barriers to educational leadership and representation	Racial bias in hiring, underrepresentation, burden of representation, gendered stereotypes
2. Instructional leadership: challenges, commitment, and development	Behavioral interruptions, administrative overload, limited instructional support, preparation gaps
3. Relationships, motivation, and school climate	Student and staff trust, emotional intelligence, building school culture
4. Equity, representation, and systemic barriers	Tokenism, stereotypes, equity, lack of support for equity work
5. Support systems, mentorship, and leadership development	Need for mentoring, identity-affirming guidance, peer networks
6. Systemic challenges and operational barriers	Crisis management, policy overload, burnout from administrative tasks
7. Collaboration, curriculum development, and instructional planning	PLCs, curriculum alignment, team teaching & co-planning
8. Community and stakeholder engagement	Parent communication, community visibility, cultural responsiveness
9. Living the mission and integrity in leadership	Mission alignment, authenticity, value-driven decision-making
10. Socioeconomic context and resource disparities	Funding inequity, staffing shortages, poverty challenges

All codes were reviewed, and no new information was found. The emergent themes were reviewed for consistency. Two retired African American male principals, who previously reviewed the open-ended interview questions for clarity, assisted in conducting an external audit. These principals reviewed the themes for confidence in the

collected qualitative data and provided feedback that the themes were consistent with the collected data. Interview transcripts are searched for discrepant cases and reported in the findings to add to the credibility of a research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, no discrepant cases were found in the interview transcripts.

Conclusion

Open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis were used to systematically analyze the interview data collected from African American male elementary school principal aspirants guided by Hallinger and Murphy's (1986) instructional leadership framework. The conceptual framework was used to identify leadership-related functions and processes within participant narratives. The instructional leadership framework provided a structure to interpret how aspirant principals navigate leadership responsibilities. For example, functions such as supervising instruction, promoting teacher development, and framing school goals were evident in how participants discussed collaboration and curriculum planning. Leadership processes like decision-making, communication, and environmental interaction also emerged as central to how these aspiring leaders perceived and enacted their roles. Following open coding, axial coding was conducted to group codes into larger, interconnected categories representing patterns across the data. Thematic analysis was then used to develop these categories further. Thus, the coding process moved from descriptive to analytical, using participant narratives to build thematic meaning that contributed to the challenges and opportunities faced by African American male aspirant principals in navigating the pathway to school leadership.

Results

The confidentiality of the participants and the study site was protected by using alphanumeric identifiers, such as P1, P2, ..., and P9, where P1 represented the first participant and P9 represented the ninth participant. The full names of participants were not revealed in the findings. Interview transcripts, communication emails, consent forms, and my reflexivity journal were stored in my home office in password-protected folders on my laptop. All study-related information was encrypted on the laptop and saved for 5 years as required by the IRB. After 5 years, all electronic files, handwritten notes, and consent forms will be shredded or securely deleted. Data analysis revealed 10 themes. Each theme's keywords, phrases, and categories are presented as follows.

Theme 1, barriers to educational leadership and representation, is about the systemic and cultural challenges that African American male principal aspirants encounter, such as racial bias in hiring, underrepresentation, and the burden of representing an entire demographic. Categories include racial and gendered stereotypes, exclusion from decision-making, and perceived misalignment with dominant leadership norms. Participants used phrases like "hard to get a seat at the table," "they want someone who fits the look," and "I represent all Black men here." These align with leadership processes like decision-making, group process, and environmental interaction from the instructional leadership framework, highlighting how broader societal dynamics shape access to leadership.

In regard to Theme 2, instructional leadership: challenges, commitment, and development, participants described tensions between their instructional commitments

and the practical challenges of the role, including behavioral management, insufficient preparation, and time constraints. Categories included *administrative overload and limited instructional support, especially for those transitioning from nontraditional roles such as school counselors*. Common phrases were “spent all day on discipline,” “hard to focus on instruction,” and “we did not learn this in our prep program.” These issues correspond to instructional leadership functions such as supervising instruction, protecting instructional time, and promoting professional development of teachers.

According to Theme 3, relationships, motivation, and school climate, strong interpersonal relationships were viewed as foundational to effective leadership. This theme included categories, such as *emotional intelligence, trust-building, and caring leadership*. Participants shared that “relationships come before academics,” “you need to earn their trust,” and “you have to lead with care.” These insights connect to the leadership processes of communication and group process, as well as the function of developing incentives for teachers and students, showing how relational leadership supports school climate and motivation.

Theme 4, equity, representation, and systemic barriers, includes persistent inequities and tokenism experienced by aspiring Black male leaders. Categories included *stereotype threat, equity fatigue, and superficial diversity efforts*. Quotes such as “only asked about race during Black History Month” and “they do not want real equity” demonstrate participants’ frustration with performative gestures. These challenges relate to leadership processes such as decision-making, environmental interaction, and change process, emphasizing the need for leaders to enact rather than espouse equity.

Under Theme 5, support systems, mentorship, and leadership development, participants emphasized the need for structured and culturally affirming mentorship. Categories included *peer networks, long-term mentorship, and leadership pipelines*. Statements like “I never had a mentor who looked like me” and “we need more than internships” highlight the gap in meaningful support. These align with the instructional leadership function of promoting professional development, as well as processes such as communication and group process, indicating that targeted mentorship can nurture leadership talent and reduce isolation.

Theme 6, systemic challenges and operational barriers, covers how operational tasks and unpredictable district-level changes detract from instructional leadership. Categories included *administrative burden, policy fatigue, and emotional exhaustion*. Participants mentioned “putting out fires all day” and “district changes the plan every week,” reflecting the tension between managerial responsibilities and instructional priorities. These challenges align with protecting instructional time, environmental interaction, and decision-making, revealing how system-level constraints limit leadership effectiveness.

For Theme 7, collaboration, curriculum development, and instructional planning, participants described collaboration with teaching staff as essential for improving instruction. Categories included *team planning, curriculum alignment, and consistency in pedagogy*. Phrases such as “we rewrite the curriculum every year” and “we plan together weekly” illustrated their role in instructional coherence. These phrases reflect leadership functions such as coordinating the curriculum, framing school goals, and supervising

instruction, highlighting the principal's role as an instructional leader and facilitator of shared learning.

Under Theme 8, community and stakeholder engagement, participants highlighted the importance of engaging parents and community members to build trust and ensure student success. Categories included *culturally responsive communication, community outreach, and student-family engagement*. Examples included “we host family nights,” “I translate newsletters for parents,” and “families need to feel welcome.” These align with the leadership processes of communication and environmental interaction and the function of framing and communicating school goals, showing how inclusive practices promote stakeholder collaboration.

According to Theme 9, living the mission and integrity in leadership, authentic leadership emerged as a critical theme. Participants stressed aligning actions with the school's mission and values. Categories included integrity, mission-driven leadership, and ethical alignment. Statements like “walk the talk,” “do not be performative,” and “stay true to the work” reveal the importance of leading with consistency. This theme connects to framing school goals, effective communication, and decision-making, demonstrating that principled leadership builds trust and coherence across the school.

Finally, under Theme 10, socioeconomic context and resource disparities, participants identified inequities in school funding, staffing, and student readiness due to socioeconomic challenges. Categories included *limited resources, poverty-related trauma, and community disinvestment*. Examples such as “we cannot even afford basic supplies,” “no counselors or support staff,” and “kids come hungry” highlight these

disparities. These challenges relate to leadership functions like allocating resources, monitoring student progress, protecting instructional time, and showing how principals must navigate external inequities while advancing instructional goals.

Theme 1: Barriers to Educational Leadership and Representation

This theme is about the systemic and cultural challenges that African American male principal aspirants encounter, such as racial bias in hiring, underrepresentation, and the burden of representing an entire demographic. This theme aligns with leadership processes like decision-making, group process, and environmental interaction from the instructional leadership framework, highlighting how broader societal dynamics shape access to leadership. Systemic, societal, and institutional barriers disproportionately impact Black male educators' access to leadership roles, compounded by gender dynamics, placement in high-need schools, and limited instructional opportunities. Underrepresentation intensifies isolation and pressure. Black male educators face systemic and societal barriers that limit their access to leadership roles in education.

P8 highlighted racial and gender biases in female-dominated elementary schools. P8 explained, "Some barriers are just the perception of Black males... in a female-dominated profession." Similarly, P9 noted restricted instructional leadership opportunities. P9 explained, "I feel like I was mostly relegated to disciplinary measures... never really had an opportunity to lead instructionally." According to P8, the isolation of being "the only person in an environment ... you have the burden of representing the whole demographic." P9 repeated placements in high-need schools that limit broader leadership growth compound these challenges. Other participants, such as P3, P4, P6, and

P7, emphasized the critical lack of Black male principals and how this affects visibility, mentorship, and career navigation.

Thus, P8 and P9 emphasized racial and gender biases, with P8 noting the challenges in female-dominated elementary schools and P9 highlighting restricted instructional leadership roles and repeated placement in high-need contexts. P3, P4, P6, and P7 underscored the lack of Black male principals and the necessity of culturally responsive training. In conclusion, Black male educators face persistent systemic and societal obstacles, including racial and gender biases and limited access to leadership roles, which restrict their career growth and representation in schools.

Theme 2: Instructional Leadership: Challenges, Commitment, and Development

Instructional leadership is vital but often compromised by time constraints, behavioral demands, and a lack of formal opportunities. Commitment to academic excellence remains strong across participants, supported by data-driven instruction and student-centered philosophies. P1, P2, and P7 emphasized intentional lesson planning, standards alignment, and student engagement.

P8 and P9 described comprehensive instructional planning and data use to drive mastery and student inspiration. P8 demonstrated a strong commitment to academic success through detailed planning explained. P8 explained, “I plan weekly by looking at standards and goals ... then grade it and look at the data to determine mastery.” P9 applied a student-centered philosophy. P9 prioritized student engagement and data-driven instruction. P9 said, “I want to make sure my students can see themselves in instruction

... I want to inspire them to become the best versions of themselves.” P9 added, “I am heavy into data ... I backwards map a lot.”

P4 and P5 noted a lack of preparation or structural support for instructional leadership, especially for those from nontraditional backgrounds. P4 and P5 emphasized the importance of scaffolding, coaching, and dedicated instructional leadership separate from discipline duties. P4 said that gaps in preparation pose ongoing challenges. P5 emphasized, “We need instructional-dedicated administrators separate from discipline.” P5 noted that gaps in preparation exist, especially for leaders from nonteaching backgrounds.

Participants emphasized the importance of instructional leadership in improving student outcomes and acknowledged that this role is frequently overshadowed by behavioral management or operational demands. Despite systemic challenges, the participants showed a strong commitment to data-driven, student-centered instruction and the continuous development of their leadership skills. However, some participants reported feeling unprepared due to inadequate training or background, underscoring the need for better leadership preparation that aligns with the instructional demands they face.

Theme 3: Relationships, Motivation, and School Climate

This theme connects to the leadership processes of communication and group process and the function of developing incentives for teachers and students, showing how relational leadership supports school climate and motivation. Relational trust and emotional connections are foundational to student motivation, behavioral management,

and overall school climate. Strong relationships precede effective instruction and leadership.

Trust-building and school culture reinforce the critical role of relational leadership in motivating school communities and sustaining positive climates. Participants emphasized relational trust and emotional connection as foundational to fostering positive school climates. Building trust, emotional connection, and a supportive school climate are essential foundations for motivating students, managing behavior effectively, maintaining discipline, and improving outcomes. Building trust with students and families through consistent, caring interactions motivates staff and enhances engagement.

Participants viewed strong interpersonal relationships as foundational to effective leadership. Strong, authentic relationships with students are essential for motivation, discipline, and learning. P7, P1, and P6 highlighted relationship-building through mentoring, high expectations, and emotional responsiveness. P1 said, “The classroom is like a family.” P1 builds a “classroom family,” emphasizing care, connection, and motivation through personal investment.

P3 underscored the importance of relationship-driven leadership, suggesting it determines whether a mission succeeds or fails. P3 believed in belief-driven leadership because it impacts student success. P4 noted that behavioral challenges often overshadow instructional focus, impacting school culture. P4 observed that behavioral support often dominates leadership time, limiting proactive culture building. P4 added that visible, consistent leadership, especially from African American men, can positively shape behavior and identity development at the elementary level. P2 and P6 established trust

through high expectations and responsiveness. P7 explained, “Relationships must come before instruction.” P7 leads by building rapport.

Participants consistently described relational trust as the foundation for building effective leadership and instruction. Recognizing that relationships “come before instruction” illustrates how emotional connection, care, and community engagement are essential to student success and discipline management. However, behavioral challenges often consume leaders’ time, limiting their capacity to nurture these relationships fully. Building trust and emotional connection is fundamental for motivating students and creating a favorable school climate. According to P1 and P7, relational trust and emotional connections form the foundation for motivation and favorable school climate. P7 said strong relationships with students, families, and staff are prerequisites to effective instruction, reinforcing research on caring for leadership’s role in school success. P2 and P6 emphasized that trust arises from consistent responsiveness, and P4 said that high expectations, though behavioral challenges, often reduce time available for climate-building efforts.

Theme 4: Equity, Representation, and Systemic Barriers

This theme concerns an ongoing need for genuine equity practices, culturally responsive leadership, and increased representation to dismantle systemic biases and create inclusive environments. This theme includes persistent inequities and tokenism experienced by aspiring Black male leaders. These challenges relate to leadership processes such as decision-making, environmental interaction, and change process, emphasizing the need for leaders to enact rather than just espouse equity. Equity remains

challenging, with participants calling for authentic culturally responsive leadership, mentorship programs, and greater visibility of Black educators and leaders.

P3 cautioned that teacher biases and mindset are significant barriers. P5 called for mission-aligned staff who live the values of inclusion. P6 critiqued the abandonment of equity PD and calls for authentic equity in practice. P6 explained, “Equity PD is abandoned, and authentic equity is missing.” P7 emphasized the need for culturally responsive training and collaborative systemic change. According to P8, persistent systemic bias and equity gaps shape leadership experiences. P8 mentioned, “Staff do not believe Black male teachers should even interact with Black boys.” P8 recounted bias when “They told a colleague not to put Black boys in certain Black males’ classes because ‘they do not know how to deal with Black men.’” P8 said that systemic bias contributes to marginalization. P8 concluded that stereotypes and unequal treatment reduce access to equitable opportunities and role models. P9 pointed to systemic neglect leading to burnout and a “final straw” reapplication process.

P3, P4, and P7 highlighted a lack of Black male principals, noting how that affects visibility and career navigation. P3, P6, and P7 advocated culturally responsive leadership and authentic equity practice rather than performative gestures. According to P3, P6, and P7 emphasized the need for equity-focused professional development and authentic practice. Moreover, P3, P6, and P7 emphasized that the shortage of diverse leaders limits role models and equitable career opportunities. P3, P6, and P7 advocated culturally responsive leadership and authentic equity practices rather than performative acts. P8 and P9 shared experiences of racial bias and operational obstacles limiting

success. According to P8 and P9, systemic racism and inequity are hindering leadership and equitable school environments, including biases that label them unable to manage certain students.

Theme 5: Support Systems, Mentorship, and Leadership Development

Support systems, mentorship, and leadership development are important for Black male educators who often experience professional isolation. The participants said long-term, identity-affirming mentorship indicates the importance of culturally relevant and sustained support mechanisms that foster leadership capacity. Common mentorship does not address the challenges underrepresented leaders face, emphasizing the need for intentional, systemic support. Participants emphasized the need for identity-affirming mentorship and targeted leadership development. Participants advocated for cohort-based programs that provide support rather than brief internships, allowing leaders to develop culturally responsive leadership practices. Participants described how mentorship reduces professional isolation and fosters instructional leadership skills, highlighting mentorship programs and support networks as essential categories.

Strong mentorship, professional networks, and cohort support are vital to overcoming isolation and fostering leadership growth. P3, P4, and P7 advocated for long-term, identity-affirming mentorship and shadowing programs beyond short internships to develop leaders from underrepresented backgrounds effectively. Specifically, P3, P4, and P7 emphasized relational and sustained support as keys to developing aspiring leaders, especially those from underrepresented groups.

P7 explained, “Professional development must be technical and cultural.” P8 emphasized, “The biggest support would be a cohort of Black male principals.” P8 called for cohorts of Black male principals and targeted mentorship to provide understanding and guidance. P9 credited professional alliances like “the [redacted] County Alliance of Black School Educators” and supportive colleagues such as [redacted] for crucial career support. In conclusion, structured, relational, and identity-affirming pathways for leadership development are essential, especially for underrepresented groups. Mentorship, cohorts, and professional alliances provide support to Black male educators to enhance leadership learning and culturally responsive practices.

Theme 6: Systemic Challenges and Operational Barriers

Participants revealed that systemic barriers are a disconnect between leadership expectations and the realities faced by Black male educators in practice. Specifically, participants stated that day-to-day operational issues like staff biases undermine educators’ capacity to focus on leadership and instruction. Moreover, participants mentioned “putting out fires all day” and “district changes the plan every week,” reflecting the tension between managerial responsibilities and instructional priorities. These challenges revealed how system-level constraints limit leadership effectiveness.

P8 highlighted how unplanned class coverages disrupt instructional focus. P8 explained, “You come into the building and find out you have coverage for the third period... That is the biggest barrier.” Moreover, P8 emphasized that racial biases among staff were worsening challenges. Specifically, P8 mentioned, “They told a colleague not to put Black boys in certain Black males’ classes because ‘they do not know how to deal

with Black men.” P9 stated, “The burnout aspect of being an assistant principal in a very high need school... that played a role,” and the frustration of “All assistant principals had to reapply for their jobs... that was like the last straw.” P4 and P5 pointed to time constraints, behavioral crises, administrative neglect, and lack of time as barriers to instructional leadership. Thus, P8 and P9 described how operational tasks and behavioral management detract from instructional leadership, explaining that frequent disruptions, policy shifts, and racial biases contribute to stress and burnout. In conclusion, daily operational challenges hinder leadership and instructional focus.

Theme 7: Collaboration, Curriculum Development, and Instructional Planning

Collaboration emerges as a strategy for effective instructional leadership. The participants’ experiences reflect that collaborating on curriculum and instruction enhances coherence, shared accountability, and professional learning. This theme highlights how collective curriculum design and planning efforts can create more equitable and consistent instructional practices, which are especially important in high-need schools. Participants reported that collaborative planning and curriculum development with colleagues strengthen instructional leadership and improve student learning outcomes.

P1-P9 emphasized the importance of collaboration with teaching staff for improving instruction. Participants referred to leadership functions, such as coordinating the curriculum, framing school goals, and supervising instruction, highlighting the principal’s role as an instructional leader and facilitator of shared learning. According to P1-P9, collaborative planning and curriculum development strengthen instructional

quality and leadership effectiveness because sharing expertise and mutual support enhance professional growth.

P1, P2, and P3 supported scaffolding and team planning because scaffolding and team-based planning are essential for shared instructional success. P1, P2, and P3 emphasized that collaboration creates consistency and shared accountability across staff. P8 prioritized instructional time and curriculum implementation. P8 explained, “I always focus on implementing curriculum and instruction first and foremost.” P9 collaborated extensively on curriculum and planning with colleagues. P9 explained, “I have done some curriculum writing with social studies.” P9 noted involvement in curriculum writing while P8 emphasized prioritizing “implementation of curriculum and instruction first and foremost.” P8 and P9 emphasized that collaborative planning is vital for instructional leadership, promoting shared accountability and curriculum development. In conclusion, scaffolding, coaching, and team-based planning are the best practices to support teacher development and student learning because collaborative efforts ensure consistency and foster shared ownership of instructional goals. Thus, collaborative curriculum planning strengthens instructional leadership.

Theme 8: Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Engagement with families, students, and the community is essential for building trust and improving school outcomes. This theme aligns with the leadership processes of communication and environmental interaction and the function of framing and communicating school goals, showing how inclusive practices promote stakeholder collaboration. Participants highlighted the importance of engaging parents and

community members to build trust and ensure student success. Specifically, participants emphasized culturally responsive communication, community outreach, and student-family engagement.

Engaging families, students, and community stakeholders in inclusive ways is important to building trust and advancing school improvement. P3 and P6 emphasized the need for communication with and engagement of community stakeholders to build trust and improve school outcomes. P3 and P6 noted the need for multilingual and culturally sensitive outreach. P6 said, “Communication needs to be authentic.”

P8 stated that educators need strategies to involve community members. P8 organized newsletters and family math nights and engaged city officials in mentoring events. P8 explained, “We have a newsletter, host Math Bingo nights, and invite city council members to attend mentoring ceremonies.” P9 suggested student involvement in school improvement teams. P9 explained, “Student members presented what they needed from teachers and introduced themselves to the community.” Moreover, P9 leads school improvement teams and involves students directly in teacher feedback and vision development.

P1-P9 mentioned that effective leaders prioritize family involvement, student voice, and culturally responsive communication. P1-P9 explained how engaging families and incorporating student perspectives in decision-making create inclusive partnerships and promote equity. P1-P9 emphasized that stakeholder involvement is vital to school. These strategies reflect community engagement and stakeholder inclusion, which are essential for building trust and responsive school environments. Culturally responsive

communication strategies should include student voice in school decision-making processes. These strategies reflect community engagement and stakeholder inclusion, essential for building trust and responsive school environments.

Theme 9: Living the Mission and Integrity in Leadership

This theme emphasizes that effective leadership depends on authenticity and integrity, and leaders must genuinely represent the school's mission and values in daily actions. Additionally, this theme connects to framing school goals, effective communication, and decision-making, demonstrating that principled leadership builds trust and coherence across the school. Participants emphasized aligning decisions, culture, and relationships with core principles for a mission-driven school community. Specifically, participants stated that leadership should align actions with school mission and values. Participants reported that a school's mission must be lived authentically, consistently, and visibly across staff, leadership, and school culture.

For leadership to be effective, the school's mission must be genuinely embodied, visible, and consistent. P1-P9 said integrity and mission-driven leadership are key to trust and positive culture. P3 warned against performative leadership lacking authenticity. P3 implied, "Mission-driven authenticity matters."

P5 advocated for staff concentration in mission rather than superficial compliance. Moreover, P5 advocated for daily mission modeling and aligning decisions with core values. P5 stated, "Modeling the mission daily, aligning decisions with core values." Finally, P5 explained, "Staff should be indoctrinated into the mission, not just recite it."

P3 criticized performative leadership and called for authenticity, while P5 emphasized that staff should be deeply immersed and “indoctrinated” into the mission rather than merely reciting it. P3, P5, and P7 emphasized authentic leadership that models and lives the school mission and values. P7 said, “Model the mission daily and align decisions with core values.” P7 stressed the daily modeling of the mission and the creation of platforms that reflect core values. This integrity in leadership ensures that the school culture reflects and supports its stated goals, fostering trust among students, families, and staff. This consistency ensures that culture, practices, and relationships reflect the school’s core values and build community trust.

Theme 10: Socioeconomic Context and Resource Disparities

This theme emphasizes that socioeconomic status affects access to resources, family engagement, and student readiness, necessitating context-sensitive strategies and community partnerships. Participants identified inequities in school funding, staffing, and student readiness due to socioeconomic challenges, using phrases such as limited resources, poverty-related trauma, and community disinvestment. These challenges relate to leadership functions like allocating resources, monitoring student progress, protecting instructional time, and showing how principals must navigate external inequities while advancing instructional goals. Participants emphasized that recognizing these disparities is essential for crafting context-sensitive, localized strategies that address unique school and community needs.

P4 and P5 described how limited time and capacity in underfunded schools create a cycle where behavioral management dominates, limiting academic support. P4 and P5

discussed limited capacity due to behavioral triage and funding shortages. P6 explained, “Socioeconomic status shapes parental involvement, attendance, materials, and morale.” P6 contrasted affluent and Title I schools, highlighting disparities. P6 explained, “Basic resources and parental responses differ drastically.” P7 called for community collaboration to support marginalized students. P7 explained, “Community collaboration drives change.” P4, P5, P6, and P7 stated that socioeconomic disparities affect school conditions, resources, family engagement, and student readiness. P4 and P5 highlighted challenges under-resourced schools face, limiting instructional support time and increasing behavioral crises. Recognizing these disparities is essential for designing effective, context-specific interventions. This theme interprets socioeconomic status as a fundamental factor influencing school resources, family involvement, and student readiness.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this study was established through interview transcription, member checks with participants, and maintaining a reflexivity journal to minimize researcher reactivity. The interview protocol has been developed by me and reviewed for clarity by two retired African American male principals. These professionals were not participants in the study and had no direct association with it; they assisted by conducting an external audit. Thick description presented rich and detailed contextual information about the participants, settings, and phenomena. Thick description facilitates transferability by enabling readers to judge the applicability of findings to other contexts, thereby enhancing the study’s impact and relevance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln

& Guba, 1985). The research findings reflect the participants' responses to a research phenomenon (Creswell, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009). Trustworthiness is the degree of confidence in qualitative data (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). A qualitative researcher needs to ensure the quality of research (Yin, 2009).

Credibility

Findings are presented using accurate data collected from the participants. Member checks were conducted with all participants to establish credibility of the interpretations. All participants were invited to review the findings and provide feedback on their accuracy and resonance with their experiences. This process ensured that the interview data were interpreted correctly and authentically represented participant perspectives, thereby reducing researcher misinterpretation and strengthening trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, two retired African American male principals, who previously reviewed the open-ended interview questions for clarity, assisted in conducting an external audit. A reflexivity journal was kept to minimize researcher bias (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of the study setting and outlines the data collection plan designed to ensure the study's credibility.

Transferability

Transferability is about describing how the findings may be transferred to other similar study settings (Creswell, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009). The study has been described in detail to support transferability. The findings include excerpts from the interview transcripts to support the themes. The findings are presented in Chapter 5 in

detail. The findings of this study were compared with those of other studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability

Dependability is established when a research process is audited and the findings are consistent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009). Chapters 1 and 3 provided detailed study descriptions, including data collection and analysis, to establish dependability. Future researchers willing to replicate this study may have similar findings using a similar research methodology, context, and participant selection criteria. A qualitative researcher ensures accurate and consistent findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Two retired administrators reviewed the findings and did not recommend any edits. In Chapter 5, findings are interpreted.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability, the findings must not be influenced by a researcher's experiences, perceptions, or biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Yin, 2009). Confirmability was maintained by presenting accurate data derived from participant interviews. In Chapter 5, I provide an objective interpretation of the findings and detail efforts to minimize bias, including maintaining a reflexivity journal throughout the study. Throughout the research process, reflexivity was maintained to acknowledge positionality and potential biases. Reflexivity contributes to transparency and ethical rigor, reinforcing the authenticity and integrity of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Summary

Data analysis revealed 10 themes (Table 6). P1-P9 spoke about education leadership, particularly for Black male educators navigating systemic barriers and operational challenges. Participants emphasized student achievement and equity and that they confront persistent obstacles, including racial bias, underrepresentation, and resource inequities, as principal aspirants. Participants' narratives emphasize that meaningful change requires intentional mentorship, collaborative instructional leadership, and authentic engagement with families and communities. Moreover, expressing the school mission with integrity and addressing socioeconomic disparities are essential to fostering equitable and effective educational environments.

The participants conveyed the urgent need for systemic reforms and sustained support to cultivate diverse, empowered leaders who can advance school equity and excellence. The participants' experiences illustrate a complex interplay of systemic barriers, personal dedication, and the crucial role of relational and community engagement in the leadership journeys of Black male educators. The themes highlight the persistent inequities that restrict access and advancement, the resilience and instructional commitment of the educators, and the need for systemic change to provide equitable opportunities, resources, and support. According to P1-P9, Black male educators navigate systemic barriers, instructional challenges, and operational obstacles, while striving to foster student achievement and equitable, mission-driven school cultures. Key enablers include strong mentorship, authentic community engagement, culturally responsive leadership development, and deliberate collaboration. Understanding these interpretations

helps illuminate the areas for intervention and support in educational leadership development and equity initiatives. In Chapter 5, I interpret the findings and describe the study's limitations. I conclude Chapter 5 with recommendations and implications.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. A basic qualitative study was used to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants identified the supports and barriers to becoming principals. One-on-one semistructured interviews were appropriate for this qualitative study because the research phenomenon required qualitative data to explore how African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceived the supports and barriers to becoming principals. The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: What barriers do African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive in becoming principals?

RQ2: What supports do African American male elementary school principal aspirants perceive as needed to become principals?

Interpretation of the Findings

Theme 1: Barriers to Educational Leadership and Representation

This theme is about the systemic and cultural challenges African American male principal aspirants encounter, including racial bias in hiring, underrepresentation, and the burden of representing an entire demographic. This theme also aligns with leadership processes, such as decision-making, group dynamics, and environmental interaction from the instructional leadership framework, highlighting how societal dynamics shape access to leadership.

Systemic, societal, and institutional barriers disproportionately impact Black male educators' access to leadership roles. P1-P9 reported challenges like gender dynamics, placement in high-need schools, and limited instructional opportunities. P1-P9 also stated that Black male educators are underrepresented. Systemic leadership inequities remain embedded in U.S. school systems (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024), perpetuated by racial bias in hiring, limited leadership pipelines, and exclusion from key decision-making roles.

Research showed that less than 30% of African American educators enroll in principal preparation programs, mainly due to systemic bias (Bastian & Drake, 2023). African American aspiring leaders often face school racism (Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023). Only 9% of principals identify as African American, underscoring the persistent leadership gap (Williams, 2024).

Multiple studies confirmed that African American male administrators face inequities grounded in both race and gender discrimination (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024; Bastian & Drake, 2023; Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023). Gender stereotyping, especially in female-dominated elementary schools, further restricts opportunities for advancement (Lee & Mao, 2023). Discriminatory barriers continue to obstruct pathways to promotion for diverse educators (Edwards & Anderson, 2023), and many Black male educators are relegated to disciplinary roles rather than given instructional leadership opportunities—limiting their professional development and visibility.

Participants in the study echoed this dynamic. P8 highlighted racial and gender biases, noting: “Some barriers are just the perception of Black males... in a female-

dominated profession.” Similarly, P9 shared, “I feel like I was mostly relegated to disciplinary measures... never really had an opportunity to lead instructionally.”

According to P8, the isolation of being “the only person in an environment ... you have the burden of representing the whole demographic” illustrates the psychological toll of underrepresentation. P9 also described being repeatedly placed in high-need schools, which limited broader leadership growth.

Participants P3, P4, P6, and P7 emphasized the critical shortage of Black male principals and how this affects visibility, mentorship, and career navigation. Disparities in access to leadership development, professional support, and mentorship are compounded by both racial and gender dynamics (Deaver, 2023; Nava et al., 2024). Even when confident in their potential, aspiring Black administrators face difficulties acquiring and demonstrating the skills needed for leadership roles (Lash et al., 2024).

To address these inequities, school leaders must support “cultural change in the organization” (Brandmo et al., 2021, p. 206) and demonstrate racial competence by recognizing that “school leaders must understand racial, ethnic, and cultural issues” (Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023, p. 230). In conclusion, African American male aspiring school leaders confront deeply entrenched barriers, including systemic racism, gender stereotyping, underrepresentation, and limited access to instructional leadership, that collectively restrict their advancement and representation in educational leadership.

Theme 2: Instructional Leadership: Challenges, Commitment, and Development

Instructional leadership is central to school success; however, time demands, behavioral management, and a lack of formal support or preparation affect African

American male principal aspirants particularly. While these leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to student achievement and data-driven practices, they also experience structural limitations that undermine their ability to lead instructionally. The conceptual framework of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986) emphasizes the importance of setting high academic expectations, supporting teaching and learning, and maintaining school-wide goals. Principals also implement collaborative decision-making processes to ensure effective instructional practices throughout the school (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). However, despite this framework, many aspiring leaders report that real-world constraints reduce their capacity to effectively carry out these instructional duties.

Participants in the study reflected this tension. P8 described a detailed planning routine grounded in standards and data: “I plan weekly by looking at standards and goals ... then grade it and look at the data to determine mastery.” P9 shared a similar approach, “I am heavy into data ... I backwards map a lot.” P9 emphasized the importance of a student-centered philosophy: “I want to make sure my students can see themselves in instruction ... I want to inspire them to become the best versions of themselves.”

Despite this commitment, participants acknowledged persistent barriers. P4 and P5 discussed feeling unprepared for the instructional leadership demands of their role, particularly when coming from nontraditional backgrounds. P4 cited gaps in preparation, while P5 stressed the need for “instructional-dedicated administrators separate from discipline.” These perspectives showed the disconnect between leadership training and the day-to-day instructional expectations principals face.

This theme aligns with the broader research literature. African American male principal aspirants frequently experience limited opportunities for growth and advancement (Deaver, 2023; Nava et al., 2024). African American male principal aspirants may benefit from mentoring programs that support instructional leadership development (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Jones, 2024; Terosky et al., 2023). However, only approximately 11% of school leaders are African American, partly due to inadequate mentorship and leadership development systems (Williams, 2024). Principals play a vital role in providing opportunities for collaboration, feedback, and instructional support across their schools (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023). When these leaders are underprepared or unsupported, instructional leadership suffers.

Participants consistently expressed a deep commitment to instructional excellence. P1, P2, and P7 emphasized standards alignment, student engagement, and intentional lesson planning. However, their instructional leadership was often overshadowed by behavioral and operational demands. Districts should better scaffold and support instructional development, especially for African American male leaders, who may face additional challenges tied to systemic bias and underrepresentation.

Equity-centered leadership is essential. African American school leaders bring cultural knowledge that supports African American students' academic development through empowerment and culturally responsive instruction (Antonetti & Sauers, 2024; Williams, 2024). Diverse student populations benefit from leaders who reflect their identities and can connect with their lived experiences (Perrone, 2022). School district

administrators should prioritize hiring equity-centered principals who understand the communities they serve (Gooden et al., 2023).

In conclusion, African American male aspiring principals showed strong instructional leadership potential rooted in culturally responsive practices, data-informed planning, and student engagement. However, insufficient training, lack of instructional focus in preparation programs, and competing school management demands challenge their ability to enact these practices. Targeted mentorship, culturally relevant leadership development, and dedicated instructional roles are essential to strengthen instructional leadership.

Theme 3: Relationships, Motivation, and School Climate

This theme highlights the importance of relational leadership in promoting positive school climate, student motivation, and effective communication—core processes within the instructional leadership framework. Relational trust, emotional connection, and inclusive leadership practices support school-wide motivation, enhance teacher-student relationships, and contribute to improved behavior and learning outcomes. This theme aligns with the leadership processes of communication and group process and the leadership function of developing incentives for students and staff (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

According to Hallinger and Murphy (1986), principals should foster collaborative group processes, facilitate open communication, and maintain consistency in school goals. Effective principals promote group cohesion and resolve conflict in ways that support school-wide learning goals (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). They engage

stakeholders in shared decision-making and foster professional relationships to support instructional growth and school culture (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

P1-P9 consistently emphasized the foundational role of relationships in leadership. P7 clearly stated, “Relationships must come before instruction.” P1 described their classroom as a “family” to motivate and engage students. P2 and P6 shared that trust emerges through consistent responsiveness and high expectations, while P3 described relationship-driven leadership as the determining factor in the success of the school’s mission. P4 noted that while strong relationships are key, behavioral demands often consume leadership time and diminish proactive culture-building efforts. P4 also emphasized that “visible leadership,” especially from African American male leaders, “supports student identity and behavioral development.”

These reflections align with findings from Hosseingholizadeh et al. (2023), who stated that effective principals foster climates that support learning and trust. P1-P9 engaged stakeholders collaboratively, offered emotional and instructional support, and sustained positive environments that enhanced teaching and learning. Leadership that centers on connection and care enhances teacher motivation and professional identity, improving outcomes across the school community (Cece et al., 2022).

Relational leadership also benefits from culturally relevant approaches. Edwards and Anderson (2023) found that diverse teachers trust diverse principals more because they feel valued and supported. P1-P9 stated that trusting relationships increase motivation and help teachers pursue leadership pathways. African American principals,

in particular, serve as models and mentors, influencing aspiring leaders through positive, equity-centered school environments (Jones, 2024).

Strong interpersonal relationships also affect student motivation and behavior. According to P9 and P7, building rapport with students and families increases engagement, reduces disciplinary issues, and improves school climate. These emotional connections make students feel seen and valued, creating the psychological safety needed for learning. As P9 noted, “I want to make sure my students can see themselves in instruction ... I want to inspire them to become the best versions of themselves.”

Despite the critical role of relationships, many participants reported that behavioral management frequently overshadows instructional leadership. P4 and others observed that constant behavioral issues can detract from long-term climate-building efforts. This theme highlights the need for systemic support for principals to prioritize relationship-building.

Terosky et al. (2023) found that school leaders must build professional relationships with staff to foster collaboration and improve teaching. Nava et al. (2024) and Grooms et al. (2024) emphasized the need for equity-oriented, relational leadership to create school climates where teachers and students feel supported and included. In conclusion, relationships are foundational. P1-P9 affirmed that trust, emotional connection, and consistent communication with students, families, and staff drive motivation, support behavioral management, and create a positive school climate. However, systemic barriers and time constraints often limit leaders' ability to engage in this relational work fully. To foster equity, motivation, and improved outcomes, schools

must support principals in developing authentic relationships as a core leadership responsibility.

Theme 4: Equity, Representation, and Systemic Barriers

This theme focuses on the systemic inequities, racial bias, and tokenism that persistently affect aspiring African American male school leaders. This theme aligns with the leadership processes of decision-making, environmental interaction, and change processes outlined in the instructional leadership framework. Effective leadership requires more than performative commitments to equity because it demands intentional, equity-driven action embedded in school and district leadership practices.

Participants described the emotional and professional toll of inequity and marginalization. P6 explained, “Equity professional development is abandoned, and authentic equity is missing.” P7 and P3 similarly emphasized the need for culturally responsive training and leadership that models authentic equity, not symbolic gestures. P5 called for mission-aligned hiring, urging that staff “live the values of inclusion,” while P3 cautioned that teacher mindsets and biases remain a significant obstacle.

Experiences of racial bias were pervasive. P8 recounted being marginalized by assumptions that Black male educators were unfit to teach Black boys. P8 said, “They told a colleague not to put Black boys in certain Black males’ classes because ‘they do not know how to deal with Black men.’” P8 explained, “Staff do not believe Black male teachers should even interact with Black boys.” P9 described how sustained neglect and institutional barriers led to exhaustion and a “final straw” that discouraged continued pursuit of leadership.

The lack of representation in leadership compounds these inequities. P3, P4, and P7 noted the critical shortage of Black male principals and its effect on visibility, mentorship, and career advancement. P8 and P9 explained that the absence of supportive systems leads to burnout and reinforces harmful stereotypes, restricting advancement and perpetuating exclusion. P1-P9 stressed the need for collaborative, systemic change to remove structural barriers and create truly inclusive school environments.

The literature reinforces these lived experiences. African American aspiring principals continue to face racial discrimination (Tran et al., 2023). Gender stereotyping and racial bias persist in principal preparation and hiring (Lee & Mao, 2023), leading to underrepresentation of Black educators in leadership (Gooden et al., 2023; Perrone, 2022). Schools often lack leaders with cultural and community knowledge reflective of their student populations (Gooden et al., 2023). In response, researchers argue for strategically hiring equity-centered, racially conscious leaders (Gustafson et al., 2021; Smith, 2021).

District leaders must move beyond rhetoric and adopt intentional equity-focused policies. Grooms et al. (2024) emphasized that equity should be central to all leadership practice and preparation. Equity should include mentoring, inclusive hiring, and the development of leaders who reflect the demographics of the students they serve (Grooms et al., 2024). District equity plans must be actionable, supporting stakeholders in implementing the school system's inclusive vision (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024).

Principal preparation programs should be designed to address racism in schools by promoting equity, inclusion, and equal access (Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023). Black

male leaders benefit from equity-oriented training, culturally responsive mentorship, and collaborative engagement with educational stakeholders (Chan et al., 2022; Nava et al., 2024). In conclusion, systemic racism continues to hinder the advancement of Black male educators. P1-P9 underscored the need for authentic equity practices, culturally responsive leadership, and intentional representation in educational systems.

Theme 5: Support Systems, Mentorship, and Leadership Development

This theme explores the importance of mentorship, professional support systems, and identity-affirming leadership development for Black male educators pursuing principalship. Aligned with the instructional leadership framework, this theme emphasizes how mentorship and cohort-based development facilitate growth in leadership processes such as decision-making, instructional leadership, and environmental interaction.

Participants consistently underscored the need for culturally responsive, long-term mentorship and structured development. P3, P4, and P7 highlighted that short-term internships are insufficient for leaders from underrepresented backgrounds. Moreover, P3, P4, and P7 advocated for identity-affirming mentorship and relational support. P7 stated, “Professional development must be technical and cultural.” P8 added, “The biggest support would be a cohort of Black male principals,” reinforcing the need for culturally grounded mentorship. P9 credited professional networks, such as the [redacted] County Alliance of Black School Educators, and mentorship from leaders like [redacted] for career guidance and emotional support.

Approximately 11% of school leaders are African American, and this underrepresentation is linked to limited mentorship opportunities and systemic bias (Williams, 2024). African American male aspiring principals lack adequate access to mentors or structured support programs (Williams, 2024). Mentorship is essential to principal preparation and leadership development (Bastian & Drake, 2023). However, mentorship should address skill development and support leaders' cultural and professional identities. Research showed that experienced principals must lead principal preparation programs and include identity-affirming practices that help aspiring principals, particularly from marginalized groups, transition from classroom teaching into leadership roles (Bastian & Drake, 2023; Chan et al., 2022). Principal preparation programs should incorporate cohort-based models, leadership shadowing, and ongoing collaboration.

Support from school district administrators and board members is essential. Aspiring African American male principals require guidance from senior district leaders (Chan et al., 2022; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Districts should apply equity-based hiring and develop policies that acknowledge the challenges male minority educators encounter (Gustafson et al., 2021; Lee & Mao, 2023). Moreover, diverse school leaders are uniquely positioned to support teachers and advocate for culturally responsive practices, yet they remain underrepresented in leadership roles (Tran et al., 2023). Districts should implement intentional mentorship, cultivate inclusive professional networks, and support systemic leadership development that values diversity (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Nava et al., 2024). In conclusion, mentorship, professional

networks, and leadership development are critical for increasing the representation and success of Black male school leaders. Culturally relevant and identity-affirming support systems, such as mentorship cohorts and long-term leadership partnerships, are essential to reducing isolation and fostering culturally responsive instructional leadership.

Theme 6: Systemic Challenges and Operational Barriers

This theme highlights the disconnect between leadership expectations and the operational realities faced by African American male educators, particularly aspiring school leaders. Participants revealed that day-to-day management responsibilities, institutional instability, and racial bias undermine their ability to lead instructionally and equitably. These issues reflect broader systemic challenges that restrict access to leadership and the ability to sustain effective leadership once in those roles.

P8 described the disruptive nature of unplanned class coverages: “You come into the building and find out you have coverage for the third period ... That is the biggest barrier.” P8 also noted that biases among staff compound these challenges, explaining, “They told a colleague not to put Black boys in certain Black males’ classes because ‘they do not know how to deal with Black men.’” Similarly, P9 shared that burnout resulted from leading in under-resourced, high-need schools, stating, “All assistant principals had to reapply for their jobs ... that was like the last straw.” P4 and P5 emphasized behavioral crises, administrative instability, and lack of time as recurring obstacles, with P5 calling attention to leadership’s reactive posture, often limited to “putting out fires all day.”

These experiences demonstrate how operational demands, such as staffing shortages, sudden policy shifts, and a lack of district support, interfere with instructional leadership and contribute to emotional exhaustion. Bastian and Drake (2023) identified systemic bias and inequitable working conditions as barriers that disproportionately impact aspiring African American leaders. Racial bias in schools remains a central barrier, with aspiring Black principals often facing discriminatory treatment and limited autonomy (Rasmussen & Raskin, 2023). According to Rasmussen and Raskin (2023), aspiring leaders must navigate schools where equity and inclusion are often aspirational rather than practiced. Despite completing equity-focused principal preparation programs, many African American leaders still report being marginalized in leadership decisions and expectations.

Effective leadership requires district and school administrators to move beyond rhetoric and adopt culturally and community-responsive leadership models (Gooden et al., 2023; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Researchers argue that schools need leaders who understand and reflect the communities they serve, particularly in high-need, diverse contexts (Gooden et al., 2023). Instructional leaders must also be prepared to manage systemic inequities while focusing on equity and inclusion (Nava et al., 2024).

In conclusion, aspiring African American male school leaders often face an unmanageable tension between operational demands and instructional priorities, compounded by racial bias, inconsistent district policies, and a lack of systemic support. These barriers inhibit leadership growth and contribute to burnout and disillusionment. To support the success of diverse educational leaders, districts must address these

systemic operational barriers through strategic planning, equity-centered policy implementation, and culturally responsive leadership development.

Theme 7: Collaboration, Curriculum Development, and Instructional Planning

This theme highlights the significance of collaborative practices in strengthening instructional leadership. Participants emphasized that engaging in curriculum design, instructional planning, and team-based decision-making fosters coherence, shared accountability, and equity in instructional delivery, particularly in high-need schools. Collaboration emerged as a strategy and a mindset that enhances instructional leadership capacity and promotes professional learning.

P1-P9 consistently underscored the importance of collaborative planning and curriculum development with teachers to enhance instructional quality and student outcomes. P1-P9 framed these practices as essential components of instructional leadership, aligned with Hallinger and Murphy's (1986) model, which includes coordinating curriculum, framing school goals, and supervising instruction. According to P1-P9, collaboration creates shared responsibility for student success, consistency across classrooms, and opportunities for professional growth.

P1, P2, and P3 emphasized team-based scaffolding, noting that structured collaboration leads to more equitable instructional practices. P8 stated that prioritizing curriculum fidelity and instructional implementation is important. P8 explained, "I always focus on implementing curriculum and instruction first and foremost." P9 stated, "I have done some curriculum writing with social studies," illustrating how involvement in curriculum development deepens instructional leadership and shared ownership.

Cece et al. (2022) supported this emphasis on collaboration, noting that principal support is strongly associated with teacher professional development. Their study emphasized the value of “social support” and strategies that “offer choices or boost teacher confidence” (p. 14).

Hallinger and Murphy (1986) also highlighted the importance of collaboration in managing change and implementing instructional reforms. Principals must develop skills to lead significant instructional and curricular changes through collegial engagement and stakeholder input (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Shared decision-making and reflection are critical practices in instructional leadership development (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). Additionally, Rangel et al. (2024) found that aspiring principals benefit from professional partnerships with senior administrators. Professional partnerships should be formed through collaborative efforts in curriculum and instructional planning.

In conclusion, collaborative curriculum design and planning enhance instructional leadership by fostering shared accountability, instructional consistency, and mutual professional growth. P1-P9 affirmed that scaffolding, coaching, and team-based planning practices improve teacher efficacy and create more equitable learning environments for students. Districts should prioritize collaborative structures that promote inclusive leadership development and shared instructional ownership to support emerging leaders, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Theme 8: Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Engaging families, students, and community stakeholders is essential for building trust, promoting inclusivity, and improving school outcomes. This theme aligns with the

leadership processes of communication and environmental interaction and the leadership function of framing and communicating school goals (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

Participants emphasized that inclusive, culturally responsive communication and meaningful community outreach foster stronger relationships and improve educational equity and student outcomes.

P3 and P6 highlighted the importance of authentic, multilingual, and culturally sensitive outreach to engage families and local stakeholders effectively. P6 stated, “Communication needs to be authentic,” underlining the necessity for sincere and culturally responsive engagement practices. P8 described concrete efforts to engage the community, such as organizing newsletters, family math nights, and involving local government in mentoring events: “We have a newsletter, host Math Bingo nights, and invite city council members to attend mentoring ceremonies.” P9 emphasized student engagement, stating, “Student members presented what they needed from teachers and introduced themselves to the community,” illustrating how student voice contributes to school improvement planning and community trust-building.

P1–P9 said effective leaders prioritize family involvement, student voice, and culturally responsive communication. P1-P9 demonstrated that community engagement and stakeholder inclusion are core to effective instructional leadership, particularly in schools serving marginalized populations. P1-P9 said that involving families and students in decision-making strengthens trust and promotes equity in educational practices. Hallinger and Murphy (1986) stated that principals must “receive input from educational stakeholders, such as teachers, parents/guardians, students, community, and government

officials to develop and frame school goals” (p. 6). Principals are required to “mediate environmental expectations and incorporate them into the school’s program” (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 12).

Research supports these findings. Gooden et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of hiring diverse school leaders with historical and community knowledge aligned with the needs and values of the school district. Perrone (2022) also emphasized that diverse students benefit from diverse school leaders who are equity-centered and community-focused. Mansfield and Lambrinou (2024) argued that districts must implement equity-based policies and involve stakeholders in decision-making to support inclusive leadership and district-wide improvement.

Instructional leadership must also be stakeholder-centered, as principals are responsible for fostering relationships that support teaching and learning (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023). Effective school leaders inspire stakeholders, manage instructional programs, and communicate the school’s mission (Brandmo et al., 2021; Cox & Mullen, 2023; Xia & O’Shea, 2023). Engaging stakeholders in shaping the school vision is a core competency of effective leaders, mainly when aimed at improving student outcomes (Bukko et al., 2021). Community and stakeholder engagement is a leadership strategy and an equity practice that supports culturally responsive schooling and builds sustained trust among all members of the educational ecosystem. In conclusion, aspiring principals must develop equity-oriented skills and engage with stakeholders throughout the educational process (Chan et al., 2022; Nava et al., 2024).

Theme 9: Living the Mission and Integrity in Leadership

This theme highlights that effective leadership depends on authenticity and integrity, with leaders incorporating the school's mission and values daily. Leadership aligns decisions, culture, and relationships with the core principles of a mission-driven school community. P1-P9 emphasized that leadership should not be performative but rooted in genuine commitment to the school's mission, creating coherence and trust across staff and stakeholders.

Communication is a critical leadership process whereby principals build “productive and working relationships with teachers and staff via face-to-face communications to communicate the school's mission regarding the curriculum and instruction” (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 9). Principals also engage in collaborative decision-making to develop policies that support effective classroom instruction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). These leadership functions depend on integrity to foster a school culture where the mission is lived authentically, visibly, and consistently.

Literature revealed that challenges remain in recruiting leaders to serve diverse students. There is a need to recruit diverse school leaders who know the school district's vision and mission (Edwards & Anderson, 2023; Gooden et al., 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022). White teachers are more likely to ascend to principal roles than African American educators (Lee & Mao, 2023). Instructional leadership is central to this mission-driven approach. Principals influence student achievement and implement the school's mission by inspiring education stakeholders (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Yaacob & Ishak, 2023). Leadership competencies include developing and implementing a shared

school vision, managing instructional programs, and fostering collaborative environments (Bukko et al., 2021; Brandmo et al., 2021). These competencies enable principals to serve as instructional leaders who engage stakeholders in school functions and practices aligned with the mission (Brandmo et al., 2021; Grant & Drew, 2022; Xia & O’Shea, 2023).

According to Cox and Mullen (2023), principals model “instructional dialogue and meaningful supervision” that advances the school’s mission and positively impacts student achievement (p. 10). The environmental interaction involves mediating community expectations and incorporating them into school programming (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Thus, the principal’s role includes obtaining input from families, staff, and district officials to shape and communicate a mission that reflects community values (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986).

P1–P9 consistently reported that integrity and mission-driven leadership are key to building trust and fostering a positive school culture. P3 cautioned against performative leadership and emphasized that “mission-driven authenticity matters.” P5 advocated immersing staff in the mission. P5 explained, “Modeling the mission daily, aligning decisions with core values.” P5 emphasized, “Staff should be indoctrinated into the mission, not just recite it.” Similarly, P7 stressed the importance of daily mission modeling and establishing platforms reflecting core values, stating, “Model the mission daily and align decisions with core values.”

This authentic leadership facilitates a school culture that reflects and supports its stated goals and builds trust among students, families, and staff. The consistency between

mission, culture, and practice is essential to creating a coherent community committed to shared values and educational equity.

Theme 10: Socioeconomic Context and Resource Disparities

This theme concerns socioeconomic status, which affects access to resources, family engagement, and student readiness. P1-P9 identified inequities in school funding, staffing, and student preparedness, describing these challenges in terms of limited resources, poverty-related trauma, and community disinvestment. P1-P9 emphasized that school leaders should foster community partnerships. These socioeconomic disparities influence key leadership functions, including resource allocation, monitoring student progress, protecting instructional time, and advancing instructional goals amidst external constraints.

Principals allocate resources toward instructional improvement by setting “high standards and expectations” for classroom practices (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 8). Principals also incentivize students through honor rolls and awards, recognizing teacher accomplishments to sustain motivation (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 8). Moreover, principals facilitate effective communication of the school’s mission while ensuring consistency in resource allocation aligned with school goals (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, p. 6).

Participants P4 and P5 described how limited time and capacity in underfunded schools often create a cycle where behavioral management takes precedence over academic support. P4 and P5 noted that behavioral triage and funding shortages constrain instructional leadership and limit opportunities for academic interventions. P6 explained,

“Socioeconomic status shapes parental involvement, attendance, teaching materials, and morale.” P6 spoke about affluent versus Title I schools and emphasized disparities in teaching resources and family engagement. P7 advocated for community collaboration as a critical driver of change for marginalized students, asserting, “Community collaboration drives change.” P4, P5, P6, and P7 emphasized how socioeconomic disparities affect school resources and family engagement. Socioeconomic disparities require principals to implement localized, context-sensitive interventions to meet the unique needs of schools and communities. In summary, socioeconomic status affects educational equity, influences resource availability, family involvement, and students’ learning. Effective instructional leadership in this context necessitates acknowledging and addressing these disparities through strategic resource management and community partnerships.

Limitations of the Study

This study has limitations. Purposeful sampling and rigorous coding procedures were employed. Qualitative researchers explicitly address these limitations to strengthen the study’s credibility (Maxwell, 2013). The research site was a large public school district in the mid-Atlantic region, serving a diverse student population across more than 160 schools: approximately 110 elementary, 30 middle, and 20 high schools. The district’s total enrollment exceeds 110,000 students, with about 50,000 elementary students.

The phenomenon under study was the limited awareness of how African American male elementary principal aspirants experience and perceive supports and barriers in pursuing principalship. The population of interest included approximately 100

African American male elementary principal aspirants within the district. The target sample size was consistent with qualitative research standards, where smaller sample sizes are acceptable to achieve depth and meaning (Creswell, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). The sample size is justified by the purposeful recruitment of participants who meet specific criteria until data saturation is reached (Creswell, 2021).

Purposive sampling was applied to select nine participants. The selection criteria included: African American male elementary school teachers or counselors employed at the study site for at least 3 years, aspiring to become principals, and certified as administrators in the state. Current African American male or female principals and administrators of other ethnicities were excluded. Purposive sampling ensures participants are knowledgeable of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A small sample size remains a limitation affecting the generalizability of findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Additional limitations were the basic qualitative research design and the dependence only on interviews as the data collection method, with the researcher serving as the instrument for interview question development and data collection. This approach, while providing rich, nuanced insights, limits methodological triangulation. This study focused on African American male elementary principal aspirants and excluded teachers, families, or district leaders. The findings of this study shed light on the experiences of African American male principal aspirants and contribute to understanding barriers to leadership diversity in urban public districts.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are for educational stakeholders, the community, and researchers. The first recommendation is for districts to strengthen professional relationships and mentorship programs for African American male principal aspirants. Mentorship supports leadership development and instructional growth (Jones, 2024). Mentorship should focus on fostering professional partnerships (Cece et al., 2022; Jones, 2024; Rangel et al., 2024).

The second recommendation is for districts to address the shortage of diverse school principals, such as African American male principals. Districts may implement recruitment and retention practices to hire African American male principal aspirants to reflect the diverse student populations they serve. Districts must implement strategic recruitment and retention practices targeting racially and ethnically diverse candidates reflective of their student populations (Gooden et al., 2023; Edwards & Anderson, 2023).

The third recommendation is for districts to provide leadership development opportunities to prepare aspiring principals for leadership positions. Equity-focused development programs offer real-world experiences that cultivate instructional expertise and equity-oriented skills (Nava et al., 2024; Lash et al., 2024; Rangel et al., 2024). The fourth recommendation is for school and district leaders to reduce systemic and operational barriers that limit principals' capacity to focus on instructional leadership and school climate. Delegating noninstructional duties and providing resources to manage behavioral challenges effectively may prepare educators for leadership positions (Grant & Drew, 2022; Bukko et al., 2021; Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023).

The fifth recommendation is for school and district leaders to cultivate inclusive and supportive school cultures. Principals should foster relational trust and create school climates that value diversity (Bass, 2020; Chan et al., 2022). Developing strong relationships with students, staff, families, and communities contributes to improved educational outcomes (Brandmo et al., 2021).

The sixth recommendation is for school and district leaders to explore how principals' relational leadership shapes school climate and student achievement across diverse settings. Moreover, active community and stakeholder engagement are vital for advancing equitable school improvement. Principals should employ culturally responsive communication strategies that promote meaningful involvement of families and include student voices in decision-making processes (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Williams, 2024).

The seventh recommendation is for leadership preparation programs to invest in equity, cultural responsiveness, and instructional leadership. Training programs should better prepare principals for diverse and complex educational environments (Grooms et al., 2024; Jones, 2024). These programs should integrate authentic, real-world experiences alongside reflective practices that build genuine leadership skills.

The eighth recommendation is for further research. Future research could explore leadership preparation models in fostering equity-centered competencies among aspiring school leaders. Future research could explore innovative approaches districts use to alleviate principals' managerial burdens and assess their impact on instructional leadership and school outcomes. Future studies may examine the effectiveness of

recruitment strategies for African American male principal aspirants. Researchers could explore best practices in equity and responsiveness within diverse school communities. Future research should assess how equity-focused leadership preparation influences graduates' readiness and effectiveness in leading diverse schools.

Implications

The findings highlighted the role of professional relationships and culturally responsive mentorship in developing and retaining African American male principals. The findings also highlighted challenges in recruiting and retaining diverse principals, revealing systemic inequities within educational leadership pipelines. School districts must foster professional growth and identity affirmation (Jones, 2024; Cece et al., 2022). Districts and policymakers must address barriers by implementing recruitment strategies aligned with community needs to provide students with culturally relevant role models (Gooden et al., 2023; Lee & Mao, 2023).

Leadership preparation programs must emphasize equity and instructional leadership through tailored, context-sensitive professional development (Lee & Mao, 2023). Leadership preparation programs better equip aspiring principals to meet the demands of diverse student populations (Nava et al., 2024; Lash et al., 2024). The findings highlighted principals require support to balance operational demands with instructional leadership responsibilities. Reducing managerial burdens and providing resources for behavioral management enable principals to focus on improving teaching, learning, and school climate (Grant & Drew, 2022; Bukko et al., 2021; Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2023). Principals should receive ongoing training to foster

environments where students, staff, and families feel valued, enhancing motivation and engagement (Bass, 2020; Chan et al., 2022). Community and stakeholder engagement must be prioritized through culturally responsive communication and inclusive decision-making, incorporating student voices (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Williams, 2024).

Authentic, mission-driven leadership that models integrity fosters staff cohesion and trust, reinforcing the importance of ethical leadership practices in promoting positive school culture (Bukko et al., 2021; Brandmo et al., 2021). Principals also face the challenge of navigating socioeconomic and resource inequities. They must be equipped to advocate for necessary resources and mobilize community partnerships to support equitable learning environments (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Gustafson et al., 2021).

At the district level, leaders should create and sustain mentorship and professional learning communities that promote leadership growth and mirror community diversity (Jones, 2024; Cece et al., 2022; Gooden et al., 2023). Clear, equitable pathways for teachers—particularly from diverse backgrounds—to advance into leadership roles are essential, supported by professional development focused on equity-oriented instructional and leadership skills (Lash et al., 2024; Edwards & Anderson, 2023). Induction programs provide aspiring principals with practical, equity-focused leadership experiences and address recruitment inequities (Rangel et al., 2024; Nava et al., 2024).

Districts should promote equitable funding, mandate diversity in educational leadership, and support principal preparation programs to reduce inequities affecting diverse leaders and under-resourced schools (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Engaging students and families through culturally responsive strategies enhances school climate

and equity by fostering trust and shared accountability in decision-making processes (Williams, 2024). Community partnerships further reinforce principals' efforts by providing resources and advocacy to reduce socioeconomic barriers and support inclusive environments (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). Collaborative efforts across federal, state, district, and community levels may ensure that policies and practices are culturally responsive and aligned with the lived experiences of diverse students and educators (Jones, 2024; Gooden et al., 2023). Ultimately, fostering equity and instructional excellence requires systemic change and sustained support to dismantle barriers and empower the next generation of diverse, effective school leaders.

Conclusion

This study illustrated ten interconnected themes that deepen understanding of the challenges and opportunities surrounding African American male elementary school principal aspirants. The themes highlighted the effect of socioeconomic contexts and resource disparities, the importance of culturally responsive leadership development, the need for systemic reforms in recruitment and retention, and the role of professional relationships and mentorship. The 10 themes highlighted how leaders may foster inclusive school climates, engage families and communities, and embody school missions. The participants underscored the persistent structural barriers restricting equitable access to leadership roles. P1-P9 also highlighted the need for collaborative efforts to promote equity.

Importantly, the study's findings carry significant positive social change implications. By identifying strategies to better support African American male principal

aspirants, this research provides public school district administrators and current principals with actionable insights to strengthen mentorship, develop equity-centered leadership pathways, and implement recruitment practices that reflect and serve diverse student populations. The findings of this study can help districts increase the representation of African American male leaders in elementary schools. The implementation of the findings can foster culturally responsive and inclusive educational environments. Thus, this study contributes to dismantling systemic barriers in educational leadership, advancing social equity, and empowering future leaders to positively impact students, schools, and communities.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Interviewee Code Name:

Location of Interview:

Interview Components	Interview Questions and Notes
Introduction	<p>Good afternoon,</p> <p>I am Douglas Handy. Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your participation in this research study is critical to the study's success, which can produce recommendations for positive social change on supporting African American male elementary school principal aspirants. Your responses will help us understand African American male principal aspirants' perceptions of the barriers and supports to becoming elementary school principals.</p> <p>The interview has been scheduled to last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Although you have provided consent, please let me know if I ask a question you do not wish to answer or want to stop the interview. At that time, I will stop the interview. All data will be appropriately destroyed and discarded. The interview will be digitally recorded, and I will take notes. I will share a copy of the transcript to review for accuracy and to ensure it captures what you want to say. To maintain confidentiality, your identity will not be included in any of my documents. The study may be published, but I will not use identifying markers such as name, school district, and school site.</p> <p>Do you have any questions?</p> <p>Are you ready to begin?</p>
Question 1	<p>What barriers do you perceive to your goal of becoming a principal?</p> <p><i>Probing question:</i> When did you first perceive these barriers?</p>

Interview Components	Interview Questions and Notes
Question 2	<p>What supports do you perceive as needed to become a principal?</p> <p><i>Probing question:</i> Who should provide support to aspiring principals?</p>
Question 3	<p>How do you plan, implement, and assess classroom instruction? Give me some examples....</p> <p><i>Probing question:</i> With whom do you collaborate to plan, implement, and assess classroom instruction?</p>
Question 4	<p>To develop and frame school goals, how do you gather input from educational stakeholders (such as teachers, parents/guardians, students, community members, and government officials)? Share a story of when.....</p>
Question 5	<p>Considering your job duties, how do you focus on student academic achievement? Provide some examples of.....</p> <p><i>Probing question:</i> What circumstances, if any, make it difficult for you to focus on student academic achievement?</p>
Question 6	<p>How do you communicate the school's mission to educational stakeholders (such as teachers, parents/guardians, students, community members, and government officials)? Provide some examples of.....</p> <p><i>Probing question:</i> What role do aspiring principals have in communicating the school's mission?</p>
Closing	<p>Thank you for your time and participation. Is there anything else you want me to know or add to your responses?</p> <p>In about a week, I will send a copy of the transcript via email. You may make corrections to the transcript to ensure your thoughts, perspectives, and ideas are accurately captured. Again, thank you for your participation.</p>