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ARMORED VULNERABILITY: STORIES OF LEADER RESILIENCE AMONG  
BLACK FEMALE PRINCIPALS

By  
Nichole Richardson Ijames

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University College of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2022

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Nichole Richardson Ijames under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the people whose love, prayers, encouragement, and faith have armored me through quitting days and days of valor. They are without a doubt, God's tangible and anchoring reflection of grace and strength.

To my husband Jonathan, thank you for sacrificially yet joyfully making room for me to pursue this and every grand goal God has placed on my heart. Your leadership and strength amaze me! You have prayed me through and cheered me through. Your support through all-night writing sessions; frozen mocha runs; and endless conversation starters about resilience, intersectionality, and gendered racism has spoken volumes about your patience and your love. Your belief in me has meant more than you will ever know, and I am infinitely stronger because of you.

To my son Zachary, your brilliance and strength inspire me! Thank you for your patience over the years, as the work of pouring into the lives of other people's children sometimes demanded creative maneuvering on our part to protect and honor the call of home. This is me, holding the door for you to do better, greater, and infinitely more as you walk into all the amazing things God has called you to be!

To my parents Donald and Lorraine; my siblings Patrice, Jodi, and Wellesley; and my niece and nephews, thank you for tirelessly covering me in prayer and speaking life over me, as I labored through this process.

And, to my niece Ari, who has already demonstrated prayerful persistence and a heart for justice, I dedicate this dissertation to you as a reminder that as you continue your journey as a resilient Black woman, you stand on the shoulders of other resilient Black women and are sufficiently armored for the call to change destinies for Christ!

## **Acknowledgements**

Every step of this process bears the imprimatur of a faithful and amazing God, whose armoring has made this work possible. This journey has been bathed in purpose, and I am both humbled by and grateful for the grace and strength God has lavished along the way.

I am immensely grateful for the coaching and guidance of my dissertation committee members: Dr. Tracie Swilley, Dr. Bonnie Bolado, and Dr. Stephen Laws, my dissertation chair. Their willingness to invest both time and wisdom in support of my growth has made a compelling difference in my professional armoring. I have been particularly inspired by the remarkable leadership and mentoring of Dr. Stephen Laws, who is to be credited for making this professional venture a reality. I began this journey shortly after my first meeting with Dr. Laws, primarily because of his sincerity and his ability to effectively call out greatness in others and to walk alongside them in the process. I am a better leader and a better scholar because of his mentorship.

The armoring of my family and church community cannot be overstated. Their prayers and support have anchored me in more ways than I can fully recount.

This work would not be possible without the 10 remarkable Black women who were gracious and courageous enough to share their compelling stories of resilience in leadership. Their stories have inspired and empowered me and, by retelling, will do likewise for countless others. Their pseudonyms—Trailblazer, Olivia Patrick, Possible, Baker Langston, Isis Royalty, Shauna Jackson, Simone, Amber, Carole, and Pearl Smith—were each carefully self-selected and were extensions of their story. They are named here individually because of the power and healing they each embody. These women have

now, unknowingly, become a part of my own story and circle of professional sisterhood.

There have been other powerful and amazing Black women over the years who, by their friendship, prayers, and professional kinship have armored me for the charge of leading boldly as a Black woman in education. These Black women principals, my sister circle, have been the inspiration for this work. The idea for this dissertation began with hearing their stories and watching them lead, in spite of and because of the challenges they faced as Black women leading schools.

I am grateful to these and so many others who have supported, mentored, and influenced my growth and resilience over the years. Finally, to the Black women principals persisting in the call to lead, both on quitting days and good days, you are seen and you are valued. Destinies are being changed because of your resilient leadership.

## **Abstract**

ARMORED VULNERABILITY: STORIES OF LEADER RESILIENCE AMONG BLACK FEMALE PRINCIPALS. Ijames, Nichole Richardson, 2022: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University.

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design in its exploration of leader resilience, as shared through the lived experiences of 10 Black female principals. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture and examine Black women's perceptions of how they have grown from the challenges they have experienced in the principalship. The study capitalized on the power of stories to amplify the voices and perspectives of this marginalized group of leaders. Their stories of resilience hold significance in improving our understanding of how to better provide culturally responsive leadership development for Black female principals. Findings from the study revealed five dominant themes in the narratives, confirming a shared impact of race and gender in shaping the perception and manifestation of resilience in the leadership of Black women principals. Implications for practice include the implementation of practices that move beyond diversity to authentic inclusion and equity, the prioritization of self-care, and the call for increased mentoring and support for Black female principals.

*Keywords:* resilience, leader trauma, Black female principals, principal wellness, gendered racism, post-traumatic growth, racial battle fatigue

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

On the morning after one of my most challenging days as an educational leader, I made the intentional decision to “show up” even amid the resounding pull to do otherwise. My decision was anchored in a sense of hope and purpose beyond what the immediate circumstances could justify. That morning, I awoke hesitant and only mildly hopeful, but I readied myself and said a prayer to steady myself. And I showed up, on purpose, both “because of” and “in spite of.” The compelling call to keep showing up is only one part of the story. I also show up in spite of those soul-weary days because there is a seemingly indefatigable will to persist beyond the turbulence of leadership. It is this ongoing, rhythmic dance between these two sentiments of leading “because of” and “in spite of” that has charted my course as a leader. There are days when it is blissfully clear why I show up each day, ready to lead a learning community and continue the commitment to make a positive difference in the educational destinies of others. And then, there are “quitting days” that leave me struggling to hold on to waning efficacy—days that leave me drawing strength from deeper recesses than I knew existed. Yet on that morning in question, the decision to persist resurrected more than just a will to survive; the concept of resilience took deeper root that day and has been an inextricable part of my story ever since. This intersection of passion and purpose has fueled the will to not only persist but thrive. It was this pivotal juncture in my own professional journey and the ongoing intrigue with gleaning wisdom from the stories of others who share this journey, that now serve as the impetus for this study.

The notion of showing up as a leader when conditions are deleterious and challenges seem insurmountable is, in itself, significant; however, it is rendered more

powerful by the willful perseverance and passion that undergird the very act of showing up (Allison-Napolitano, 2014). It is less about enduring through and more about why and how one perseveres.

This purposeful and passionate persistence, despite adversity, is strongly connected to the operational definition for the term grit (Duckworth et al., 2007). It also evokes references to related terms such as stamina and emotional agility. Though not unique to leadership, these traits have increasingly been identified as baseline requisites for leadership effectiveness.

The challenges and complexities of leadership cannot be overstated; the leadership landscape reflects increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions on global and localized scales (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Entrepreneurial leader, Ben Horowitz (2014), described the challenges of leadership as a struggle that bears strong kinship to that of chronic stress. Horowitz described the struggle of the quitting days, a leader's waning efficacy, self-blame, and questioning one's why. In 2020, leadership coach, Arzhang Kamarei (2020), embarked on a mission to establish the connection between the struggles and leadership challenges articulated by Horowitz to elements commonly experienced with chronic stress. Kamarei used the term, "leader trauma" to describe the psychological impact of these leader-related stressors. Leader trauma, a concept in its nascence, acknowledges the volatility and turbulence of modern leadership but cautions against a fatalistic approach to any exploration thereof (Kamarei, 2020). Kamarei and Horowitz focused instead on the mindsets and skill sets necessary for navigating the trauma of leadership in moving toward a place of post-traumatic growth.

Modern leadership is often characterized as turbulent, chaotic, and complex, and

the demands of leadership have amplified the baseline levels of perseverance and adaptability required for leadership success (Kouzes & Posner, 2014). There is now an increasingly greater premium ascribed to the ability to adapt quickly and purposefully to change. A 2019 Gallup report aptly surmised that a successful leader is an agile leader (Edmondson, 2021). Resilient leaders are transformational leaders (Allison-Napolitano, 2014; Wescott, 2019). Warren Bennis asserted that “adaptive capacity or resilience is the single most important quality in a leader” (Patterson et al., 2009, p. 12). Volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times require steady, purposeful, tenacious leadership. Resilient leaders demonstrate a propensity for hardiness whether by natural resilience, adaptive resilience, or restored (learned) resilience (Resilient Leadership LLC, 2019). They demonstrate the fortitude of not only leading amid adversity but thriving and growing from it. Beyond being flexible and adaptable to change, Kouzes and Posner (2014) purported that those who thrive in leadership understand and demonstrate the ability to capitalize on the inherent opportunities to grow from adversity. In essence, modern leadership requires agility—a level of emotional persistence and elasticity that moves the leader beyond “going through” to “growing through.”

### ***Complexities and Challenges of the Principalship***

Educational leadership, though unique and nuanced in its organizational design and service delivery, is not insulated from the complexities and challenges that are commonplace to other leadership contexts. On the contrary, the level of turbulence and pressure is further compounded by factors inherent to the field itself. Growing demands for educational reforms, ever-expanding responsibilities, role ambiguities, and erosion of fiscal resources have collectively led to an increasing concern regarding leader well-

being and patterns of increased leadership attrition among educators (Allison-Napolitano, 2014). The pressures of the principalship are evident in the stories shared and in the attrition and mobility rates associated with the role itself. A 2018 study of school leadership attrition by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that notable leadership mobility in the principalship was evident after 1 year and became increasingly significant after Year 3 (Goldring & Taie, 2018). School safety and the looming fear of violence in schools present additional and ongoing stressors for principals (Allison-Napolitano, 2014). This fear and the growing pressure it presents are heavily shouldered by school principals and create additional layers of complexity to the role (Brown, 2016).

Public school principals, in particular, have captured the attention of scholars, as the role becomes increasingly more pressurized and turbulent (Pepe, 2011; Rousmaniere, 2013; Taylor, 2020; Westman, 2010). Rousmaniere (2013) described the American public school principal as the most misunderstood and contradictory individual in education. The principal is often juxtaposed between transformative leadership—with the expectation of being an agent of change and reform, and transactional leadership—tethered by the management of day-to-day functions that impede the very change envisioned.

Another scholar articulates the paradox of the principalship in the following manner:

Wanted: A miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paper and work double shifts (75 nights a year out). He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend much money, replace any personnel, or upset any constituency. (Evans, 1995 as cited by Fullan, 2009, p. 59)

While these observations regarding the demands of the principalship are not new, their growing prevalence and persistence over time further solidify the urgency and volatility of the increasing challenges inherent to the role of the principal. In a 2020 report, published prior to the global pandemic, former principal and educational consultant, Rachel Taylor, aptly captured principal perceptions of their own experiences within the role; comparisons were made to feeling as if one were hanging from a cliff and to living in a swirling tornado. Contributing factors and barriers cited include a perceived sense of isolation, diminished autonomy, and an insurmountable workload (Taylor, 2020).

### ***Gender and Race in the Principalship***

Educational leadership in the United States continues to be a White-dominated experience. NCES reported that as of 2018, 78% of the nation's principals were non-Hispanic White, approximately 11% were Black, and 9% Hispanic (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). A 2019 study summarized that between 2015-2016, Black women accounted for 13% of the female principals in the United States and only 6% of the total principalship itself (Lomotey, 2019). Within this context, Black women in the principalship are twice minoritized—by gender and by race.

While more than half of the nation's principals are women, their placement and rate of promotion differ from those of their male counterparts and are listed among the perceived barriers facing female principals (Barshay, 2020). Women in the principalship cite external challenges with regard to others' perceptions of their credibility, competence, and demonstration of strength in comparison to male principals. The commonly cited concept of the glass ceiling is another barrier for women in leadership.

In the field of educational leadership, the principalship is deemed more of a middle level leadership role, and the glass ceiling concept is more frequently addressed at higher levels of leadership ascendancy such as the superintendency or positions of higher education (Kafka, 2009); however, patterns of comparatively slower promotion rates to the principalship, among women more so than their male counterparts, offer evidence of the glass ceiling experience. An extension of the glass ceiling paradigm is the glass cliff. The glass cliff refers to the pattern of assigning women to more turbulent leadership settings where failure or the fear of failure is more pronounced (Babers, 2016; Brown, 2016). The demands of micropolitical leadership in the principalship contribute to the glass cliff, as principals navigate multidirectional exchanges from a broad range of stakeholders. The leader trauma faced by principals is not limited to the confines of interactions within the school building; however, the impact of deleterious conditions within the work environment proves to be significant in how Black women lead and interpret their own effectiveness as a leader (Beckford-Bennett, 2009; Hughes & Dodge, 1997).

These challenges are compounded for Black women, Black female principals included, who additionally navigate microaggressions, cultural misconceptions, and the ongoing, daily demands for code-switching and willful self-diminishing in the workplace (Cheeks, 2018). These stressors contribute to what Smith (2011, as cited in Adams, 2020) identified as racial battle fatigue syndrome. Adams (2020) summarized the concept as the “psychophysiological symptoms from high blood pressure to anxiety, frustration, shock, anger and depression people of color may experience living in and navigating historically White spaces” (para. 5).

## **Statement of the Problem**

In recent decades, scholars have written with great volubility about the concept of resilience. This phenomenon of persevering through and growing from challenges transcends disciplines; references to medical, physiological, political, economic, and psychological elasticity can be found in both formal research and casually constructed analogies. This study focuses on the science of resilience that is historically rooted and articulated in the field of positive psychology. Martin Seligman is credited with formally introducing positive psychology to the American Psychological Association in 1998; however, the underpinnings for this branch of psychological research, with its focus on the scientific study of human well-being, meaningful living, and thriving, were evident more than 9 decades prior and later noted in the work of Abraham Maslow during the 1950s (Froh, 2004).

The intersection of gender and racial disparities further complicates and exacerbates the challenges of the public school principal. While national data for principal demographics confirm gender dominance by females (54%) in the role of the principalship, the dominance is most concentrated at the primary grade level, and significantly less so at middle and high school levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Gender barriers in the principalship do not reflect inherent inequities regarding representation but are instead steeped in societal constraints and gender biases that are manifested in tiered assignments beyond the primary grades, as well as leadership development, role expectations, and hiring practices (Elam Farrow, 2020).

For minoritized (non-White) female principals, these barriers and biases are compounded. The American principalship is characteristically homogenized; more than



78% of America's public school principals in 2017-2018 were White. Comparatively, only 48% of American students cited were White (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Glaring disproportionalities in racial representation and a history of systemic racial and cultural inequities all justifiably contribute to barriers and biases experienced by Black and Brown principals.

If the principalship is inherently characterized by a sense of isolation, internal contradictions, and feelings of being misunderstood (Rousmaniere, 2013; Taylor, 2020), then credence is warranted for the perceived feelings of heightened marginalization and inequities reported by principals who lead while navigating the societal constraints of gender and racial barriers. These challenges of the principalship, compounded by the stressors of the double bind (gender and racial discrimination), serve as the backdrop for the study as it explores the unique stories of leader resilience demonstrated and cultivated by Black female principals.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Kouzes and Posner (2014) purported that “challenge is the defining context of leadership” (p. 2) and that great leaders recognize and capitalize on the opportunity to “turn adversity into opportunity” (p.2). Turning pain into power and adversity into opportunities are central elements of the concept of resilience. Defined as the ability to overcome adversity, resilience theory is predicated on the presence of challenges and adversity and, with it, the individual's ability to rebound from it. The concept is further expanded to connote not just the ability to “bounce back” from adversity, but that of “bouncing forward” as a result thereof (Allison-Napolitano, 2014; VanSant, 2020). For the purpose of this study, leader resilience will focus on the expanded definition of

bouncing forward, thriving, and growing from adversity—leading and growing in spite of the turbulence and challenges experienced. Acknowledging the reality that the Black female principal experience may be rife with complexities and challenges cannot overshadow the equally defining reality of the stories of resilience that are borne from these experiences. These stories, the lessons they hold, and the inspiration to be gleaned from them are the central focus of this study.

Stories of leaders persisting and thriving amid challenges do not merely inspire; scholars assert that stories wield a far more powerful impact than facts and data can (Yost & McLellan, 2013). In the growing volume of literature surrounding resilience in leadership, there is a notable degree of paucity regarding the exploration of resilience among Black females in educational leadership (Brown, 2016). The purpose of this study was to explore and highlight patterns of leadership resilience from the lived experiences of principals marginalized by gender and race. Framed within the context of a qualitative design, this study examined the lived experiences of female, minoritized public school principals, more specifically Black female principals, and their stories of leadership resilience. In recent years, the importance of counter stories—the amplifying of stories and experiences of marginalized and muted voices in a given field—has gained momentum (Bailey, 2020; Gooden, 2012; Gray, 2020). This study joins in this effort and amplifies the voices and stories of resilience among Black female principals.

In light of the recently heightened emphasis on normalizing conversations around mental health and the move to discourage maladaptive responses to psychological distress, it is important to establish the distinction between psychological hardiness or resilience, as discussed in this study, and toxic positivity or maladaptive coping during

adversity (Love, 2021). Resilience differs from toxic positivity in that it does not focus on optimism that brings with it the denial of adversity; instead, resilience is anchored in the acknowledgment that adverse conditions exist, but with it the hope and resolve to persevere in spite of such (Shulamit, n.d.). Resilience in this study is explored not as a binary trait, but as a continuum. As such, the stories of resilience uncovered in this study are not intended to measure or compare levels of resilience based on specific behaviors such as staying, leaving, or moving in leadership roles. It was my intent to highlight and celebrate the power of stories in leading and growing—both in spite of and because of challenges experienced in the principalship.

### **Research/Guiding Questions**

Primary Research Question: To what extent does leadership resilience impact the lived experiences of Black female public school principals?

Sub-Questions:

- (a) What factors and themes of resilience emerge in the unique experiences of Black female principals?
- (b) To what extent has the school leadership experience impacted the development and demonstration of resilience among Black female principals?
- (c) To what extent do gender and race impact patterns in participant perceptions, demonstrations, and interpretations of leader resilience?

### **Significance of the Study**

If a pre-pandemic principalship could be compared to living in a “swirling tornado” (Taylor, 2020, para. 7), leading during a pressurized, isolating global pandemic, overcast by the tension of palpable racial unrest should reasonably be deemed more

turbulent (Smith, 2021). During times of crises and chronic stress, leader resilience serves as the anchoring and stabilizing force for both leaders and those they lead. This study contributes to the growing body of research surrounding leader resilience and leadership development as it pertains to gender and race. Meaning-making and purposeful leadership in the face of adversity are integral qualities in the development of leader resilience and are examined in the stories shared in this study. In exploring both the internal and external variables of resilience, highlighted in the stories shared by Black female principals, this study additionally provides an extension to the evolving discourse concerning leader resilience, leader wellness, and support.

In response to the chronic complexities of leadership, scholars have turned their attention to leader-centric solutions and strategies; among them, shifts in the demand for changes in leadership development and leadership styles (Dartey-Baah, 2015). Leadership coach, Craig Groeschel, is among those who purport that personal leadership is central to positive changes in organizational leadership. In his annual leadership charge to the Global Leadership Summit, Groeschel (2019) offered a clarion call to leaders to lead with intentionality about purpose, declaring that when the leader gets better, those they lead and the organization itself get better. Leadership development, then, is posited as the bedrock for positive organizational change and growth (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). The body of research surrounding leadership development is both dynamic and extensive. A focus on empowering leaders to navigate the pressures and demands inherent to leadership is both urgent and critical.

Sharing stories of resilience is a powerful tool in leadership development (Yost & McLellan, 2013). By harnessing the power of stories around the lived experiences of

marginalized voices in leadership, this study adds both dimension and perspective about leadership itself—leadership development, efficacy, and overall effectiveness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As school districts seek to amplify efforts in both leadership development and diversity management (that is, recruiting for diversity while concurrently building capacity for more culturally inclusive environments for leaders to thrive), the themes uncovered in this phenomenological study provide positive implications for developing culturally responsive leadership and principal support. Leaders’ stories of resilience hold impact for not only those who read or hear them but also for those who have lived and experienced them—inspiring the hearer with hope and validating the voice and experiences of the story holder.

### **Overview of Methodology**

At its core, this study is about resilience. It explored the resilience of school leaders, specifically those minoritized by race and gender. Using a phenomenological approach, the study explored the experiences of 10 Black female leaders who have held or currently hold the position of a public school principal. Participants were selected from each of North Carolina’s eight education regions.

While demographic parameters for leadership context were not specified as a design element for participation in this study, demographic patterns in the areas from which participation was generated established an assumption that most participants in the study would be Black women leading in predominantly White spaces or communities.

This study obviated the use of quantitative instruments in measuring resilience among participants. A qualitative design best aligned with the research questions presented and harnessed the power of storytelling within a phenomenological approach.

The ongoing debate around the validity and cultural relevance of resilience measurements also influenced the decision against the use of quantitative methodology.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The study highlighted and extracted themes of leadership resilience embedded in the stories and the leadership experiences shared. As such, the theoretical framework that anchored the study is resilience theory, as applied from a psychological approach. The resilience framework used in this study reflects the combined influence of two ecological theories, Spencer's (1995) phenomenological variant ecological systems theory (PVEST) and Polidore's (2004) theory of adult resilience in education. Both theories were used in understanding and examining resilience development and identity formation.

Additionally, in order to more effectively examine and appreciate the perspectives of the stories of resilience shared by Black female principals, a secondary yet defining theory is employed to frame the lens through which we examine the unique layers and dimensions of their experiences. In addition to resilience theory, this study draws upon the utility of Critical Race Feminism, a cross-section of two iconic theoretical frameworks: Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. Drawing from the works of Crenshaw, Delgado, Stefancic, and Collins, the study will employ Critical Race Feminism to establish the importance of conversations about race and gender and the systemic impact thereof in shaping the perspectives and experiences of minoritized individuals. By rejecting a singular focus on race or gender and selecting a theory that considered both elements as equal components of participant identities, greater fluidity and clarity were achieved in constructing a framework for understanding the contributions of Black female voices in White spaces. Together, resilient leadership theory and Critical Race

Feminism provided a more accurate context for the stories recounted and served to preserve the value and authenticity of the voices of these leaders.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following are anchoring terms that are foundational to understanding the conceptual framework of resilience in leadership and the impact of gender and race in the leadership experience of Black female principals. Operational definitions are provided as guardrails for shaping the direction and focus of the study.

#### ***Biopsychospiritual Homeostasis***

“A point in time when one has adapted physically, mentally, and spiritually to a set of circumstances whether good or bad” (Richardson, 2002, p. 310).

#### ***Emotional Agility***

The ability to and process of navigating, owning, and directing one’s thoughts and feelings in a manner that aligns with one’s values, to yield positive and actionable changes from challenges.

#### ***Grit***

“Perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087).

#### ***Post Traumatic Growth***

“Positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). The concept is used to explain the ability to find purpose beyond trauma or adversity (Chowdhury, n.d.).

#### ***Psychological Capital***

An “individual’s positive psychological state of development,” as reflected in the individual’s sense of hope, self-efficacy, resilience and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007, p.

542).

### ***Psychological Hardiness***

“The ability of individuals to mitigate the negative results of stressors and strain as a result of the personality characteristics of commitment, control, and challenge” (McClellan, 2013, p. 111).

### ***Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF)***

“Psychophysiological symptoms—from high blood pressure to anxiety, frustration, shock, anger and depression—people of color may experience living in and navigating historically white spaces” (Adams, 2020, para. 5).

### ***Resilience***

The ability to “bounce back from adversity, frustration, and misfortune” (Ledesma 2014, p. 1). For the purpose of this study, the term resilience, as it relates to leaders, will focus on psychological resilience and include the expanded concept of not just bouncing back but bouncing forward (Allison-Napolitano, 2014).

### ***Thrive:***

The ability to move beyond recovery or survival after a traumatic or adverse experience to a place of growth or flourishing (Southwick et al., 2014).

### **Summary of Chapter**

In the spring of 2021, renowned humanitarian Oprah Winfrey and psychiatrist Bruce Perry published a book entitled, *What Happened To You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*. The authors’ expressed purpose was to emphasize the hope and healing that result from the power of storytelling used as a tool to explore and unpack experiences of trauma and adversity (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Embedded themes



of hope and resilience are couched in the stories of trauma. Similarly, this study, in acknowledging the trauma and challenges experienced by Black women in the principalship, sought to spotlight and magnify themes of resilience embedded in the leadership stories that are shared. The study, however, shifts the focus from “*what happened to you?*” to explore the underlying question of resilience: “*How did you grow from what happened to you?*” The chapter that follows provides an overview of the literature that frames and supports this query of resilience among Black women who lead as principals of schools.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Resilient leadership among Black female principals is the central focus of this study. As such, this chapter provides an overview of the body of literature deemed most salient in constructing and exploring resilience from the perspectives of Black women who have served or currently serve in the capacity of public school principals. The scope of scholarly discourse surrounding resilience is both broad and varied, encompassing a myriad of disciplines, perspectives, and models. This study focuses primarily on research relevant to resilience from a psychological perspective as it pertains to workplace experiences.

### **Resilience–Definition and Overview**

Resilience has been explored across disciplines and scholarly discourse; among them, medicine, ecology, commerce, sociology, and psychology (Southwick et al., 2014). As such, the term has assumed a polysemic utility and shares varying degrees of semantic kinship with other concepts such as grit, psychological hardiness, and emotional agility, to name a few. While the terms are not precisely interchangeable, there exists enough of an overlap in usage alone to establish cognitive guardrails for the reader in navigating the literature surrounding the concept. The American Psychological Association (2020) defined resilience as, “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress” (para. 4). Other definitions most commonly assigned to the concept of resilience include a “positive adaptation despite adversity” (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008, p. 1) and “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543), yet another scholar defined resilience as, “the ability to see yourself in the dark

abyss of failure, humiliation or depression and bounce back not only to where you were before but to even greater heights of success, happiness, and inner strength” (Everly et al., 2015, p. 2). The analogy of bouncing back is also associated with the term, reflecting the etymological congruence with the concept of elasticity (Ledesma, 2014).

While the definitions of resilience are varied, two core elements or constants have operationalized the concept: (a) the inherent presence of significant stressors or adversity and (b) a corresponding positive adaptation to said adversity (Bonanno, 2012). These two criteria are common across disciplines and applications. Bonanno (2021), citing the research of 1970s ecologist, Crawford Holling, recounted that even before the term was applied to patterns of human behavior, it was used to describe how trees survived in spite of adverse conditions. Even in its most formative context, the identifiable components of trauma and a correlated, observable response are defining components. Within the same decade, a migratory application of the term emerged in studies about resilience in people—the trauma they experience and their adaptive responses to those adverse conditions.

The earliest research on resilience as a psychological construct focused on children and adolescents and their adaptation to trauma (Luthar, 2003). Initially, these studies were used to imply an invincibility trait among subjects whose exposure to trauma and adverse conditions would have reasonable, warranted expectations of maladaptive behaviors. As the research expanded to include studies on adults and resilience, the focus also shifted to interpret resilience as an adaptive process.

The concept connotes an active exertion of will rather than a passive or serendipitous process. One scholar’s description of resilience in leadership is particularly reflective of this notion; by comparing the resilience of women in educational leadership

to the act of “persisting and resisting” through turbulent circumstances, the researcher depicted the exertion of emotional and psychological energy and willfulness (Christman & McClellan, 2008). There is an implied assumption that the response is productive in nature and conveys the act of persisting, surviving, or thriving amid adversity. Another analogy used to illustrate resilience is the mental model of bouncing a ball against a hard surface; in this analogy, the ball represents the resilient individual or leader, and the collision between the ball and the surface symbolizes an adverse event. The force of the ball hitting the surface creates a transfer of energy and a potential change in the structure of the ball itself. The material composition of the ball serves as a protective factor in determining the extent to which the force of the collision changes in the structure of the ball (Pepe, 2011). Throughout much of the literature on resilience, reference is made to the act of “bouncing back” from trauma or crisis (Allison-Napolitano, 2014); however, distinction is increasingly being made between bouncing back and bouncing forward; the latter aligned with thriving and growing from adversity, while the former reflects recovering from crisis. This study employs the “bouncing forward” approach in its exploration of resilience as a demonstrated construct in the lives of Black women in the principalship.

While scholars have made allowances for semantic overlaps between resilience and other closely related concepts, they are equally emphatic about establishing distinctions in order to preserve clarity and prevent problematic generalizations and counterproductive connotations (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Southwick et al., 2014). Among the distinctions asserted are the disclaimers that resilience, though connected with a propensity toward optimism, is not itself synonymous in practice to toxic positivity

(Shulamit, n.d.), nor is it an innate personality trait or quality of being impervious to pain or being invulnerable. The latter was used in early research to describe children who, over time, emerged stronger than was reasonably anticipated even after experiencing risk, stressors, or childhood trauma (Bonanno, 2012, 2021). As research on resilience expanded over the course of decades, the focus shifted from a deficit-centered approach (with emphasis on the trauma and risk factors experienced) to an amplified focus on resilient outcomes and the contributing factors to said outcomes (persisting and overcoming; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Patterson & Kelleher, 2005).

### **Construct Development**

Scholars assert that resilience research can be categorized into three waves. The first focused on the traits, characteristics, or environmental elements that enable individuals to demonstrate resilience. Factors associated with resilience include self-effectiveness, persistence, internal locus of control, coping and adaptation, family, social relationships, and spirituality (Richardson, 2002). Resilient scales differ in the scope of elements measured, but most scales include some variation of a core group of the elements listed. Resilient behaviors are impacted by both internal and external variables (Barasa et al., 2018; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Ledesma, 2014). Internal variables are primarily attitudinal and include optimism, efficacy, empathy, and insight. Relationships, connectedness, and social supports are listed among the external factors that impact and reflect resilience (Ledesma, 2014). These traits are described as protective factors that serve to reduce the impact of risk or traumatic experiences (Richardson, 2002). Prominent resilience scholars such as Luthar et al. (2006) and Bonanno (2012) rejected the notion of resilience being a binary, cemented trait possessed by an individual; Luthar

et al. (2006) argued it is possible to demonstrate resilience in one domain but not another. An academically or professionally resilient individual may fail to demonstrate the same level of resilience in other areas of personal development; a principal may demonstrate professional resilience but concurrently demonstrate maladaptive, non-resilient traits in other areas of their personal life (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008).

As scholars explored the external factors associated with resilient outcomes, there emerged a need to acknowledge cultural disparities in the research. Differences in the structure and accessibility of resources within various communities and cultural groups warrant a more context-sensitive approach to interpreting resilience, both in terms of outcomes and influences (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Ungar, 2012). Ungar (2012) argued that most scholars of resilience have approached their studies from a Eurocentric, middle class perspective and that “by introducing contextual and cultural diversity to our understanding of resilience, we contribute to a more heterogeneous definition of the construct” (p. 387).

The second wave of research on resilience sought to identify ways in which resilient traits can be cultivated. It is this era of research that gave way to the process-centered view of resilience. As a result, there is a growing conclusion among those who study the phenomenon that resilience can be learned (Allison-Napolitano, 2014); is comprehensive and interdisciplinary, not limited to any one specific trait (Bonanno, 2021; Patterson et al., 2009); does not preclude the presence of sadness, anger, or failure (Allison-Napolitano, 2014); and is essential for effective leadership (Hilton, 2019).

In the work of resilience scholar Glen Richardson (2002), a resilience model emerged as a cognitive guide for describing the acquisition of resilient traits. Richardson

described a linear process that begins with an individual in a state of relative normalcy known as biopsychospiritual homeostasis, where the individual has adapted to an established comfort zone reflecting a perceived balance of mind, body, and spirit. This balance, when disrupted by trauma or significant stressors, triggers a response, as the individual draws upon protective factors or traits to reintegrate to a state of growth, reintegrate to a previous comfort zone, or develop maladaptive or dysfunctional behaviors.

Patterson et al. (2009) described resilience development as a cyclical process (Hilton, 2019). The identified phases of the resilience cycle are sequenced as follows: normal conditions, deteriorating phase, adapting phase, recovering phase, and growing phase (Patterson et al., 2009). The mental model described by Patterson and other scholars has been used to support the premise that resilience exists on a continuum, is not static, and that the most effective leaders move through the identified phases, going beyond survival and recovery toward the most optimal phase of growth, setting the focus on thriving over surviving (Leggett, 2020; Patterson et al., 2009). Scholars use the term post-traumatic growth to describe the resulting thriving or growth that emerges after experiencing significant stressors or potentially debilitating adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In post-traumatic growth, outcomes go beyond the initial state of biopsychospiritual homeostasis, and individuals emerge more positively adapted, hopeful, and thriving than before (Mushonga et al., 2021).

With the first wave of resilience research seeking to identify traits deemed most common among individuals who respond resiliently to adverse experiences and the second focusing on how one cultivates resilience, the third has focused on why

individuals demonstrate a propensity toward resilience. This era of research delves further in the quest of exploring the innate, motivating factors that promote resilience (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). The resulting research has given rise to the assertion that the growth-centric and self-actualizing element of resilience is innate. Researchers Roger Mills and Rita Shuford concluded that individuals are naturally wired to pursue resilient outcomes (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). Richardson (2002), citing the work of psychology researchers Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith, affirmed their description of resilience as a “self-righting” (p. 313) mechanism, and explored the impact of psycho-spiritual factors in motivating individuals toward the pursuit of resilient growth.

Patterson and Kelleher (2005) provided a cursory and symbolic reference to a “resilience tank” (p. 6) that fuels our capacity to respond resiliently to crises. They further described three sources that fuel and replenish one’s resilience tank: personal values, personal efficacy, and personal energy. The latter, personal energy, includes four distinct energy sources: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual energy (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005). The connection between spirituality and resilience has been both challenged and lauded. Scholars such as Bonanno cautioned that there is no predictive relationship between spirituality and resilience and cautioned against a forged correlation between the two; however, spirituality continues to be listed among both the protective and promoting components associated with resilience (Efimova et al., 2019; Mushonga et al., 2021; Polidore et al., 2010).

While experts tend to agree that resilience itself is not an esoteric or isolated skill, and while most agree that resilience can be cultivated, there is far greater variance among scholars regarding *how* resilience is demonstrated, measured, and cultivated. The belief



that all individuals have the capacity to be resilient over time does not fully explain the varying degree and magnitude to which resilient behaviors are demonstrated (Richardson, 2002). The caution that a tendency toward psychological hardiness cannot be fully discounted in the development of resilience (McClellan, 2013) also reserves room for continued discussion about personal traits and motivating factors that predispose individuals toward more resilient behaviors in the face of adversity (Resilient Leadership LLC, 2019). Scholars continue to explore common characteristics and motivating factors common among those who demonstrate resilient behaviors but have amplified caution against establishing these as absolutes, predictive variables, or exhaustive traits unique to any individual or group.

### **Leader Resilience**

“If ordinary resilience is bouncing back and resuming the path one has been on, then leadership resilience is bouncing forward and leading not just oneself, but others, into new ambiguous realities” (Allison-Napolitano, 2014, p. 14). Resilience, as a psychological construct, has been explored from both a clinical perspective and an organizational or leadership context, focusing on personal resilience and professional resilience, with the latter giving way to an ever-evolving breadth of theories and tenets on leader resilience. While personal resilience has been described as the act of surviving or bouncing back from trauma or adversity, leader resilience is transformative and equated more with bouncing forward, thriving, or growing beyond a given experience or a series of adverse experiences. In the context of leader resilience, it is not enough to survive or recover from adversity; leader resilience is defined by the extent to which one grows from or is transformed because of or in spite of the adversity (Ledesma, 2014).

Leader resilience theory emerged as a cross-section between transactional and transformational leadership theory (Dartey-Baah, 2015). A resilient leader is defined as one who persists and leads from strength with conviction and clear purpose amid complexity and turmoil, all while placing a high premium on the emotional and physical well-being of those they lead and themselves (Resilient Leadership LLC, 2019). Hilton's (2019) research on leadership in modern education yielded the conclusion that "resilience is central to the whole notion of sustainable leadership" (p. 24) and purported that among resilient leaders, the following three traits are most dominant: clarity in purpose, a disposition toward optimism, and a willingness to trust (Hilton, 2019). Clarity of purpose, as Hilton explained, is reasonably akin to Sinek's "why," the anchoring premise for leaders and organizations to define and align processes and actions to a guiding vision and purpose. Optimism, the second trait Hilton highlighted as a common characteristic among resilient leaders, is, in this context, clearly distinguished from veiled positivity or a willful disregard and dissociation from reality; it is, instead, a disposition toward hopefulness and a tendency toward confident expectations for favorable outcomes, even in the face of adversity. Trust, the third characteristic, is described as both the willingness to risk interdependence on others and also the ability to inspire others to create a climate of trust.

In addition to their conceptualization of the resilience cycle, Patterson et al. (2009), applying a focus on educational leadership, asserted that there are three distinct and requisite skill sets for resilient leaders. They are grouped accordingly: resilience thinking skills, resilience capacity building skills, and resilience action skills (Patterson et al., 2009). Resilience thinking skills reflect the cognitive filtering and meaning-making

processes employed by leaders to interpret the adverse circumstances they encounter. A clear and accurate understanding of the traumatic or challenging event is integral; however, Patterson et al., like Hilton (2019), contended that the resilient leader is able to be both pragmatically realistic and confidently hopeful in the assessment of adversity. This duality is termed realistic optimism (Patterson et al., 2009; Patterson & Kelleher, 2005). Resilience capacity building skills represent the core or fuel for resilient behaviors; these skills, which include a leader's sense of personal efficacy, values, well-being, and support network, are dynamic and are cultivated and replenished over time. Resilience capacity-building skills provide a critical foundation for the manifestation of resilience action skills. The third skill set requires the leader to move from thinking, theorizing, and internalizing to actionable outcomes and applications. Patterson et al. surmised that perseverance, adaptability, courage, and responsibility are among the four types of observable actions taken by resilient leaders.

The three resilience skill sets were foundational in the design of Patterson et al.'s (2009) Leader Resilience Profile: a 73-item, self-perception survey engineered to measure leader resilience. The Leader Resilience Profile, published in 2009, is but one of the many instruments that have been developed to capture, quantify, and interpret resilient behaviors. Instruments have differed in terms of intended subjects, psychometric properties highlighted, general design, and parameters for interpretation. A 2017 methodological review of resilience rating scales identified three instruments deemed most stable for measuring resilience among adults: the Resilience Scale for Adults developed in 2003; the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, also developed in 2003; and the Brief Resilience Scale published in 2008 (Morote et al., 2017). These scales were

commended based on the psychometric properties explored. Of the three, the Resilience Scale for Adults provided the greatest evidence of stability and transference across various cultural contexts. It is, however, imperative to acknowledge that siloed or binary efforts to quantify and interpret resilience have resulted in marked skepticism and caution on the part of resilience researchers (Bonanno, 2021).

It is important to acknowledge the impact of culture and social factors on the interpretation of resilience, both in terms of the process of developing resilient skill sets and in the application or manifestation of those skills (Ungar, 2008). As such, a review of the unique challenges and stressors experienced by Black women in the principalship is not only helpful but essential in understanding how they develop and demonstrate resilience.

### **Challenges of Black Women and the Principalship**

The American principalship, a pivotal role in the nation's educational architecture, is repeatedly described as complex and turbulent. Those who navigate the role know well the rewards and challenges inherent to leading schools. Research and literature on educational leadership are rife with evidence that speaks to these challenges. Growing attention has been given to various characteristics, styles, and impacts of those who lead; however, a literature gap exists in the exploration of Black women and their experiences with navigating the challenges of leading as principals of schools.

While education remains a female-dominated profession, there is an inverse ratio relative to the presence and representation of women in leadership roles. With each upward tier in leadership assignment, there is a decrease in the representation of female leadership (Hekker, 2021). Black and Brown women, in particular, are more

disproportionately underrepresented in senior educational leadership roles, as are their stories of how they experience leadership in a setting where leading is still characterized by Eurocentric maleness (Bailey, 2020).

The glass ceiling and glass cliff are among the commonly cited and perceived barriers with which women contend in school leadership and leadership in general. The glass ceiling, formally postulated by Gay Bryant in 1984, describes the imposed yet often unwritten barriers women experience with regard to professional mobility and compensation (Thorpe, 2019). These hurdles, though seemingly invisible and implicit in practice, are a readily noted and shared reality among women in leadership (Lewis, 2019). In educational leadership, women are less likely than their male counterparts to be assigned to the principalship roles at the secondary level (Thorpe, 2019). Women are also promoted to school leadership at a more delayed rate than men with equivalent training and credentials (Johnson, 2017).

The term glass cliff describes the assignment of women to leadership roles marked by turbulence and an increased likelihood of failure (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). African American women are often assigned to turnaround schools or settings where stakes are high and success is elusive at best (Beckford-Bennett, 2009; Sample, 2020).

Brown and Black women in school leadership face hurdles that are comparable to those of their similarly gendered peers; however, scholars assert that the added burden of racial bias and discrimination they endure further exacerbates an already vitriolic experience (Jean-Marie, 2013; Livingston, 2013). The term concrete ceiling has been used to describe this layered complexity and resistance reflected in the barriers erected

for Brown and Black women who lead (Sample, 2020). As Babers (2016) explained,

While glass is tough, you can shatter it.... Concrete, on the other hand, is practically impossible to break through by yourself. It's definitely impossible to see through.... This is what women of color face in the workforce: an often-impenetrable barrier, with no vision of how to get to the next level. (para. 5)

The cement ceiling is not exclusively restricted to limitations in access to senior leadership roles but also to limitations in professional agency and efficacy among Brown and Black female leaders. These limitations are the byproducts of practices rooted in a majoritarian bias and racial discrimination. Taulton (2020), citing studies conducted by Mosley (1980) and Choates (2012), explained that even when women of color ascend to leadership roles, their credibility is often challenged, their voices muted, their impact devalued, and their presence diminished.

In a multi-case study, Reed (2012) explored the intersection of race and gender on the leadership of three African American principals; the findings were interpreted along four basic assumptions about commonalities, variances, and impact of their lived experiences. While some variances were noted in the experiences of the principals, the narratives reflected a shared pattern of experience, leading Reed to conclude that Black women in the principalship were often not

taken as seriously as their male counterparts. This belief was manifested through their perceived disrespect from parents and dismissive actions from some of their superiors and colleagues. In some instances, the principals described situations where they were blatantly disrespected as a Black female. (Reed, 2012, p. 49)

A majoritarian bias in leadership skews power in the direction of the dominant

group; in so doing, established norms and values in leadership become those of the majority. Education, in general, reflects a majoritarian bias wherein policies, practices, and norms are skewed toward White androcentrism (Brown, 2016; Crete, 2020). Additionally, Thorpe (2019) explored research findings shared by Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), indicating that despite strong demonstration of competence in leadership roles, women also contend with the tendency among followers to express a preference for male leaders.

As Black women lead within the educational context, they do so bound by insidious yet pronounced constraints of White male values, expectations, and dominance. Black women learn to navigate two distinct but converging worlds, learning to maneuver the labyrinth of the dominant culture, while preserving the essence of their own cultural identity (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). As Brown (2016) explained, “it is an internal struggle to be who you are expected to be without losing who you are” (p. 14). Successful navigation of this struggle is a necessary component for survival and growth as a Black woman in leadership (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). As such, successful Black women in educational leadership are often acculturated to develop a bicultural identity (Beckford-Bennett, 2009).

There are some benefits to this bicultural leadership and perspective; however, the pressures of traversing repressive racial and gender practices impact the way Black women interpret their own leadership (Brown, 2016). Daily codeswitching, self-diminishment, navigation of microaggressions, and increased marginalization are among the proficient practices developed as a part of this bicultural identity.

Codeswitching describes the fluid and strategic movement between the verbal and

nonverbal communication of the dominant culture and that of one's native culture (Cheeks, 2018). The concept of self-diminishment aligns with Cheek's (2108) findings where Black women in leadership reported being coached to "dim their light" (para. 15) or temper aspects of their personalities or professional competencies in order to better assimilate and avoid engendering discomfort among coworkers. The act of self-diminishment is often represented as a strategy for professional and self-preservation. Failure to lead within the confines of established margins can create additional challenges and stressors for Black women. Livingston (2013) identified a general assumption and perception that Black women may be penalized for demonstrating agentic behaviors within the workplace.

Racial and gendered microaggressions differ from overt racism and sexism in that they are more subtle in nature; they are interactions that reflect derogative assumptions and stereotypes about minority groups (Joseph, 2020). Though subtle, these microaggressions and stereotypes hold potentially powerful and negative implications for Black women, their professional identities, leadership interactions, and development (Joseph, 2020; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). It is further purported that prolonged and significant exposure to microaggressions can result in a condition scholars identify as *racial battle fatigue*, a psycho-physiological response to race-related stressors which includes symptoms such as headaches, gastro-intestinal illnesses, insomnia, depression, fatigue, and low self-esteem (Adams, 2020; Smith et al., 2011).

Marginalization is a natural byproduct of minoritization and underrepresentation, plights borne out of the challenges of the double bind that comes with leading as a Black woman in education (Joseph, 2020). This intense isolation owing to one's otherness is



also associated with the practice of tokenism; the showcasing of a member of an underrepresented group to ameliorate or placate calls for diversity and equity. Tokenism creates a paradox of being concurrently visible yet invisible; visible by default, owing to the rarity of one's presence as non-prototype in the role, and invisible because of barriers and practices that devalue one's input and impact (Thorpe, 2019).

Minoritized in a majoritarian context, Black women in the principalship experience a paucity of mentors (Jackson-Dunn, 2018; Thorpe, 2019). Educational research consistently supports the value of mentorship in the principalship in recognition of the inherent isolation associated with the role (Rousmaniere, 2013). The added leadership challenges experienced by Black women in the principalship amplify the need for both personal and professional support (Wells, 2013). Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) asserted,

Although men are also placed in challenging situations, women, and especially women of color, are typically more isolated, without mentors or a network of support, and are less able to garner the help that they might need when facing extraordinary challenges. (p. 172)

The research on both resilience and the principalship itself supports the conclusion that mentorship is an essential component in cultivating resilience among Black women principals in that it provides a protective barrier and support against the vulnerabilities associated with racial and gender discrimination (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011; Lomotey, 2019; Swanson et al., 2002).

Many of the challenges enumerated thus far are externally imposed; however, there are internal struggles Black women face as leaders and principals of schools. While

these challenges may stem from or link to external elements, they are discussed here within the context of psychological mindsets familiar to many Black women who lead (Brown, 2016). These mindsets also hold significant implications for cultivating and demonstrating resilience. Black women across disciplines have reported being both cautioned and encouraged by the expectation that in their assigned roles, it is not enough to be competent; to succeed, they must excel far beyond their White counterparts (Heyward, 2020). “Black parents, from decades, have told their daughters that they have to be twice as smart, twice as independent, twice as talented, and ‘twice as good’ if they want to succeed despite racial discrimination” (Heyward, 2020, para. 2). In essence, being good is not good enough; for Black women who lead, the baseline standard is to be “better than good.” This mantra serves both as a motivating element and an added, persistent stressor.

Another commonly cited internal challenge for Black women in leadership roles, such as the principalship, is the Strong Black Woman Syndrome. Scholars have determined this strength-focused mindset to be a schema unique to the racial and gender identities of Black women (Watson & Hunter, 2015). Watson and Hunter’s (2015) qualitative study, aimed at exploring the perceptions and impact of the Strong Black Woman Syndrome on various Black women, provided evidence of both benefits and threats associated with this mindset (Linnabery et al., 2014). The Strong Black Woman Syndrome is both a symbol of valor and a crucible; the emphasis on prevailing strength has proven effective in solidifying willful resolve and the decision to persist amid adversity, however, it has also influenced maladaptive or “less affirming” patterns of coping (Burton et al., 2020).

### **Framing Perspectives–The Challenge of Muted Voices**

In an editorial review of Kimberle Crenshaw’s work on Critical Race Theory, the iconic African American author, Toni Morrison, known for her prolific use of counter-storytelling, asserted that “As of the publication of *Critical Race Theory* it will be unwise, if not impossible, to do any serious work on race without referencing this splendid collection” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 498).

When exploring resilience among Black principals, it would prove negligent to minimize the role gender and race play in shaping their leadership experiences (Collins, 2000). A critical element in storytelling is that of perspective framing: establishing a point of view and the shaping of the narrative (Yost & McLellan, 2013). In educational leadership, stories and experiences have been and continue to be framed from a predominantly androcentric perspective, particularly a White male point of view (Brown, 2016; Gray, 2020; Johnson, 2021). The stories of Black women in educational leadership are comparatively muted and sparse (Beckford-Bennett, 2009).

Often deemed the “outsider within” (Collins, 2000, p.11), Black women in educational leadership learn to navigate two distinct but converging worlds; while they are Black and female, their experiences differ vastly from those of their White female counterparts and Black males (Johnson, 2017). This intersection of race and gender is complex and layered.

In some instances, the African American woman is grouped with Caucasian women to understand gender perspectives. At the same time, the African American woman is also grouped with African American men to understand race perspectives. These groupings fail to allow others to see the dynamic of the

African American woman and her double removal from the majority. (Brown, 2016, p. 24)

There are some compelling elements in storytelling that readily take center stage; for Black women, race and gender play an integral role in shaping and interpreting experiences (Beckford-Bennett, 2009; Brown, 2016). As such, a theoretical framework that honors and elevates this intersection of race and gender provides the most effective lens to explore and support understanding of the phenomena of resilience in Black women principals.

Critical Race Feminism is dual-focused in its treatment of perspective framing. It offers a cross-section between Critical Race Theory and Black feminist theories. A derivative of Critical Race Theory and borne out of the contributions of Critical Race Theory scholar, Richard Delgado, who was first credited with naming the theory Critical Race Feminism shares significant similarities with the tenets of Critical Race Theory. Both theories are presented as legal anthologies, analyzing the role of marginalized identities on power and justice; however, unlike Critical Race Theory with its focus primarily on race analysis, Critical Race Feminism examines both gender and race. To unpack the most salient principles of Critical Race Feminism, parallels and tangents are established with the founding tenets of Critical Race Theory (Hilal, 1998).

A summary of the underpinnings of Critical Race Theory that are also foundational to Critical Race Feminism includes the premise that

1. Racism is an entrenched, ordinary, and cellular component of society.
2. Racism benefits a prevailing interest of some members of society and is therefore protected by practices and norms in spite of surface-level and

ineffective efforts aimed at social justice. This concept is called “interest convergence” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

3. Race is a social construct and not biological in conception. Its design and perpetuation are supported by the interest convergence rationale.
4. The intersection of race, gender, class, and other elements of identities is a factor worthy of consideration in understanding the perspectives and experiences of minoritized people.
5. Counter narratives are essential in amplifying the voices of the marginalized. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Johnson, 2017).

The concept of intersectionality of identity is an essential component of Critical Race Feminism in that the focus on both race and gender is deemed crucial for identity formation, advocacy, and counter storytelling. Antiessentialism is also a principle magnified in Critical Race Feminism; it rejects the singularity of one voice in feminist thought and strongly asserts the significant difference in voice and perspectives between Black and Brown women and their White counterparts.

Yost and McLellan (2013) asserted the importance of storytelling in the context of growing and healing, while Collins (2000) emphasized the importance of evaluating the power behind whose story is told and who is empowered to tell those stories. Critical Race Feminism crafts a response to both principles and provides an opportunity for marginalized or muted voices to be heard in their own words and on their own terms. It offers the opportunity for counter storytelling and the introduction of new insights and perspectives on resilience from marginalized Black women in academia whose stories are often inaudible or sparse (Johnson, 2017). As such, Critical Race Feminism serves as a

supporting yet critical framework for interpreting Black women's stories of resilience borne out of their experiences as principals. While scholars caution that Black women as a collective body are not monolithic in their experiences relative to race and gender, there exist enough commonalities to establish patterns among their stories (Collins, 2000).

### **Black Women Principals and Resilience**

Scholars have concluded that Black women are twice oppressed, owing to discriminatory factors associated with gender and race (Brown, 2016; Taulton, 2020; Wells, 2013). Arguably, the mere act of leading as a Black woman, by default, satisfies the first of two crucial criteria for establishing the presence of resilience. The layered and ongoing impact of the double jeopardy effect of gender and racial discrimination experienced by Black women principals creates a significant stressor that serves as a springboard for resilient leadership. Brown (2016) echoed and confirmed the conclusion of scholars such as Wiggins, Williams, James, Farmer, and White that being a woman in educational leadership presents significant challenges. "The expectations are high, the standards are high, and resilience is expected no matter the obstacles or circumstance. African American principals are seen in practice but not heard" (Brown, 2016, p. 22). These challenges collectively present a clearly identified stressor in the daily and professional lives of Black female principals, stressors for which a response—maladaptive or growth-inducive—is generated.

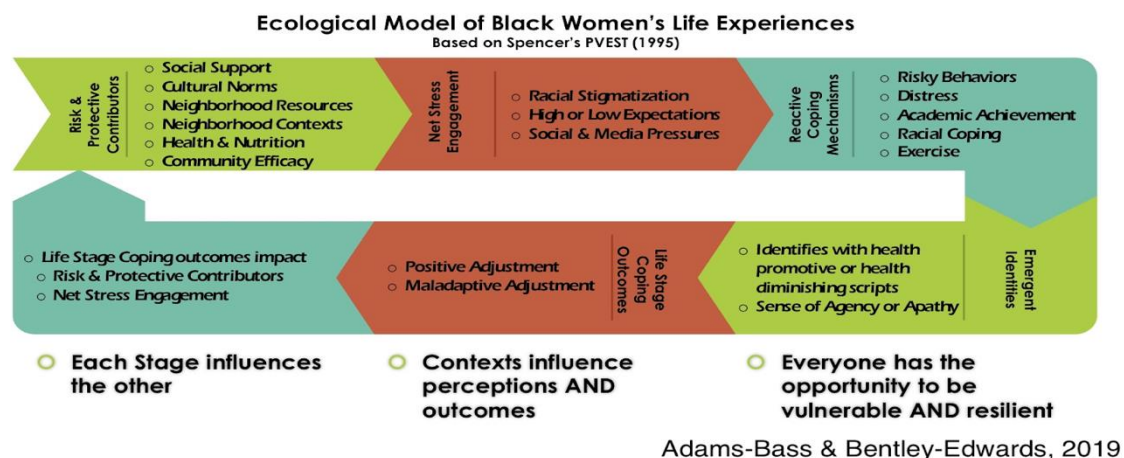
### **Framing Resilience**

Having established that the second prong of the resilience construct focuses on the development and demonstration of positive adaptation and growth in response to significant stressors, the following section explores the literature related to the

development and demonstration of adaptive, resilient responses among Black female principals. Of particular relevance are two culturally calibrated research perspectives: Spencer's (1995) PVEST and Polidore's (2004) resilience model. The former focuses on the process of developing resilient outcomes, and the latter on the characteristics associated with resilient outcomes; both employ a cultural ecological approach.

### ***PVEST***

Spencer's (1995) PVEST provides a culturally inclusive, process-centered framework for exploring identity formation in the face of risk factors and other vulnerabilities that exist in the context of normal development (Swanson et al., 2002). The phenomenological approach which undergirds this theory is lauded among researchers who acknowledge the need for more emphasis on the cultural context around the study of coping and resilience (Beckford-Bennett, 2009). Spencer, an ecological psychologist, noting the deficit-centered approach to resilience research, sought to build upon the work of fellow psychologist Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to explain how vulnerabilities can be mitigated by the environment to produce affirming, adaptive outcomes (Swanson et al., 2002). A model was created to further illustrate the theory. Included are five components: net vulnerability, net stress engagement, reactive coping methods, emergent identities, and life stage specific coping outcomes. Although initially applied to adolescents and identity development, the model has proven a successful utility with adult populations as well (Beckford-Bennett, 2009; Jackson, 2013; Rogers et al., 2021). Figure 1 represents an adaptation of Spencer's (1995) model by developmental psychologist and researcher, Valerie Adams-Bass, whose work has added clarity to the understanding of racial socialization and identity formation.

**Figure 1***Spencer's PVEST Model*

*Note.* Figure 1 reflects an adapted illustration of Spencer's model, as presented by Adams-Bass (2021).

Figure 1 builds upon the original illustration of the PVEST model by adding annotative statements to explain the balance of resilience and vulnerability as well as the recursive nature of the process (Adams-Bass, 2021).

Built on the premise that vulnerabilities are common to all individuals, the concept of net vulnerability reflects a balance resulting from risk factors being mitigated by available protective factors. In Beckford-Bennett's (2009) study where positive adaptations of Black female principals leading predominantly White schools were explored, race and gender were identified as risk factors. Protective factors in this context included cultural proficiencies gleaned from participant past experiences of otherness, their levels of educational achievements, and their overall emotional well-being (Beckford-Bennett, 2009). Studies have also identified poverty as a potential risk factor



in this regard (Swanson et al., 2002). When risk factors are balanced against the protective factors available in the individual's ecosystem, the result reflects a more accurate picture of the individual's assessed vulnerability.

Net stress management, the second component in PVEST, considers the impact of support systems on an experienced or acute stressor. While net vulnerabilities may include an underlying risk factor, the stressors indicated in this second component speak specifically to a direct experience such as an episode of microaggression or an overt act of discrimination. The presence of strong mentorship and peer group support are among the mitigating resources available to counteract the negative psychological impact of the stressors presented (Beckford-Bennett, 2009; Jackson, 2013).

Significant challenges and stressors compel a response. Spencer (1995) described these responses as reactive coping strategies. This third component acknowledges the fact that coping responses may be deemed adaptive or maladaptive and are dependent upon availability and access to ecological support. Beckford-Bennett's (2009) study associated aspects of leader mobility—staying, moving, or leaving—as possible coping responses to stressors related to gendered racism.

Coping patterns impact how individuals perceive themselves, their roles, influence, and impact across various settings. This fourth component, emergent identities, asserts a correlation between identity formation and experiences. This component holds implications for exploring how the bicultural experiences of Black women principals impact and are impacted by their identity development (Beckford-Bennett, 2009; Jackson, 2013). The connection between identity formation and leadership is firmly established in the literature around Black women and leadership. Citing Enke's (2014)

study of eight Black female educational leaders, Joseph (2020) confirmed Enke's observation that "women's identities and the contexts in which they lead shape the ways they perceive and enact power, which in turn mediates the ways they enact leadership" (Enke, 2014, p. 219; Joseph, 2020, p. 45).

The preceding four components are cyclical and bidirectional (Swanson et al., 2002). The fifth component is similarly positioned and is strongly connected to the resilient outcomes aligned with post-traumatic growth. This component is not episodic or static. It is growth- and process-oriented. Like the cycle itself, this component is ongoing and is repeated at various stages and life events.

### ***Polidore's Theoretical Model of Adult Resilience in Education***

The culture gap in early resilience research necessitated the emergence of further studies and models to better address unanswered questions regarding the impact of culture on resilience development and behaviors (Polidore et al., 2010). Polidore's (2004) narrative inquiry on the resilience of three African American female educators in the rural south resulted in the development of seven themes or characteristics of resilience: spirituality, a flexible locus of control, a bias toward optimism, autonomy, commitment, change, and positive relationships. These seven themes were readily observed in Polidore's and Polidore et al.'s (2010) review of previous studies. An eighth theme, the importance of education, developed as Polidore conducted her study (Johnson, 2018; Polidore et al., 2010). These themes are reflected in the literature prior to Polidore's study and continue to be evident in publications in the decade that followed.

Polidore (2004) highlighted the important role faith or spirituality has played in the lives of Black women in education. The women whose lived experiences served as

the subject of Polidore's study, echoed patterns evident in other studies; for these women, spirituality served as an anchoring force in their ability to persist in spite of adversity. In 2019, Thorpe also confirmed Echols (2002) findings regarding the relationship of spirituality in developing and demonstrating resistance among Black leaders. Lomotey (2019) conducted a historical review of studies pertaining to Black women principals and found that spirituality was a theme of significant importance in at least 30% of those studies. Lomotey concluded that faith or spirituality was an integral factor in the lives of Black women who served as principals.

It is, they believe, pivotal to their leadership; they rely on it every day. They credit their religious belief for their achievements. As it relates to their leadership, these women are inspired, motivated, and confident in their responsibilities in part because of their faith in religion. (Lomotey, 2019, p. 339)

Agosto and Karanxha (2011) found the phrase, "I prayed on it" (p. 52) to be a common refrain in the participant's narrative about how she resisted racial and gender barriers as a Black woman in education.

Another commonality among the Black women in Polidore's (2004) research is the ability to take responsibility in a healthy manner, by exercising a flexible locus of control. Polidore and Polidore et al. (2010) referenced and expounded upon the work of psychologist, Julian Rotter, who is credited with articulating the difference between an internal and an external locus of control (Locus of Control, 2019). The general interpretation of Rotter's work demonstrates a preference toward an internal locus of control; individuals with a tendency toward an internal locus of control are believed to be more inclined to take responsibility rather than assign blame to others or external

circumstances (Polidore et al., 2010). Individuals who demonstrate the latter are identified as having an external locus of control. Polidore et al.'s use of the term flexible locus of control acknowledged the potential harm in an indiscriminate posture of assuming responsibility in all circumstances. While a posture of blame projection is understood to be unhealthy for growth and coping, Polidore explained that there are circumstances where it is maladaptive to internalize ownership.

Optimism ranks among the most common observable and anticipated traits among individuals who demonstrate resilient behaviors (Hilton, 2019; Patterson et al., 2009; Pepe, 2011; Reed & Blaine, 2015). Polidore (2004) described this bent toward an optimistic outlook as a cultivated perspective, honed over time and shaped by experience. A bias toward optimism is a psychological mindset, not an episodic reaction. It is further noted that an optimistic leader “maintains a positive outlook about the future in the face of adversity, without denying the constraints posed by reality” (Patterson et al., 2009, p. 26). Optimism is also believed to support productive decision-making (Polidore, 2004).

The fourth theme of autonomy is akin to the concept of self-efficacy and self-esteem as asserted by Luthans et al. (2006) in their resiliency trait-state continuum (Pepe, 2011). This sense of autonomy produces confidence in the ability to exert positive control in the face of hardships. This theme connotes a contrast to sentiments of fatalism, helplessness, and hopelessness. While Polidore's (2004) research explored the lived experiences of Black women educators oppressed by racial and gender discrimination, their responses reflected a solution-centered mindset both to their work of educating students and in impacting positive change for the future.

A deep sense of commitment to a vision, goal, purpose, or people was another

theme highlighted in Polidore's (2004) study. Leading resilience scholars explained that "resilient leaders don't tend to be driven by the fear factor. They are driven by their passionate commitment to do the very best they can, especially in stressful circumstances" (Patterson et al., 2009, p. 108). Johnson (2018) further asserted that "commitment is what sustains people during difficult times" (p. 35).

Participants in Polidore's (2004) study demonstrated an openness to change. The tendency to see change as a potential for positive outcomes was inextricably woven with other themes such as spirituality, optimism, autonomy, and a flexible locus of control (Polidore et al., 2010). Resilient leaders demonstrate agility: the ability to create and respond to change in a manner that facilitates growth (Edmondson, 2021).

Resilience literature is rife with references to the positive impact of relationships on the development and manifestation of resilient behaviors (Bonanno, 2021; Patterson et al., 2009; Pepe, 2011; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). These relationships contribute to the ecosystem of support for leaders, providing a protective barrier to mitigate potentially detrimental vulnerabilities (Beckford-Bennett, 2009; Jackson, 2013). These positive relationships may manifest in the form of peer group connections, mentorships, families, and other social networks of support (Polidore, 2004). Mentorship and support have been explored both as a necessary but sparse element in the professional development among Black female principals (Driver, 2014; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Beaty and Pankake, educators whose study focused on female superintendents and principals, also confirmed the value of relationships to women in leadership (Cook, 2008). In citing their work, Cook (2008) explained, "when energy and confidence droop in the face of difficulties, resilient women reach out to someone else whose vision isn't as

clouded, whose perspective is more objective, whose energy is intact” (p. 7). The design of Polidore’s (2004) model is significant in that it also reflects the importance of an ecology of support that frames the cultural and social context within which the individual develops resilient skill sets. This design reinforces the sentiment that resilience is not cultivated in isolation or in a cultural vacuum (Polidore, 2004).

As Polidore (2004) reviewed the lived experiences of the Black female educators, an eighth theme emerged: an emphasis on the value of education. This theme acknowledged that the high premium placed on learning and education in the Black community predates the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision and Jim Crow era repressions. Formal and informal learning have culturally been deemed coveted resources for Black Americans; the former, formal education carried a heavy cost to life and freedom during the antebellum period in the United States. Johnson (2018) highlighted this deeply rooted value of education in her reference to themes magnified in research on Black educational leadership. Citing the work of Murtadha and Watts, Johnson (2018) delineated the dominant themes highlighted by their study: Educational leadership among Black Americans is woven in the fabric of American history, and Black educational leadership has been consistently viewed as a tool for social justice and has also served as a conduit for community empowerment.

Both Spencer’s (1995) theory on resilience development and Polidore’s (2004) eight themes of resilience reflect alignment with and support from resilience research and literature and the sensitivity to cultural implications in resilience development and behavioral outcomes. The overlaps and confluence of the two address both the *how* and *what* of resilient leadership for Black women and, together, formed a resilience model to

guide our exploration and interpretation of the phenomena of resilience, as presented in the lived stories of Black women in the principalship.

### **Summary of Chapter**

The challenges of the principalship are significant. The intersectionality of race and gender presents a compounding and pervasive stressor in the lives of Black women principals; however, these challenges often provide the impetus for building capacity in the development and demonstration of resilient leadership. Polidore's (2004) theoretical model of adult resilience in education, Spencer's (1995) resilience development cycle, and the principles of Critical Race Feminism combined to create the foundations for exploring and highlighting stories of how Black women principals exhibit post-traumatic growth and bounce forward from the gendered and racialized challenges experienced in their roles as principals.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Overview**

Exploring the phenomenon of resilience, as experienced by Black women principals, was the primary goal of this study. The stories and experiences of practicing and former Black female principals have been highlighted in an effort to better understand the development and demonstration of the resilience of these leaders of public schools. The dearth of self-defining stories of resilience from the perspectives of Black women in educational leadership underscores the significance of the study and its implications for leadership support and development. The study, both in terms of its structure and implementation, satisfied established expectations for methodological congruence with the identified research focus and its philosophical underpinnings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative, phenomenological approach proved most appropriate for unpacking the layered and complex construct of resilience, particularly as it pertains to framing and telling the personal stories of Black women in leadership.

Scholars assert that qualitative research is influenced by the researcher's philosophical worldview or assumptions (Mertens, 2009). The meaning-making emphasis of this study positioned it within an interpretive philosophical framework, where the goal is to search for patterns of meaning through the use of perspective framing (Butin, 2010). The convergence of resilience theory and Critical Race Feminism as employed in this study provided the framework for interpreting meaning from the stories of resilience that are shared by Black female principals.

Effective research design requires clear articulation of a problem or research focus and a description of the research design and processes (Habib et al., 2014). The



following section describes the foundational design components required for this qualitative study.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research focuses on capturing the depth or meaning of an experience, rather than an emphasis on a measurable component of frequency or magnitude thereof (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By employing a qualitative approach to the exploration of resilience, this study focused more on understanding, exploring, and meaning-making than on quantifying data around the experiences of the participants. While there have been successful quantitative and mixed method studies conducted on the concept of resilience (Ungar 2012), the nature of the research question being explored in this study lent itself to a deeper qualitative approach: exploring rich themes around the experiences of resilience shared by the collective body of participants (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

### ***Phenomenology***

While qualitative research represents one of three major research approaches, phenomenology is one of many qualitative methodologies used to explore a problem of interest and guide the research process. Anchored in the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl, phenomenological studies seek to describe rather than explain or quantify the lived experiences of individuals as they relate to a given phenomenon. Citing van Manen, Creswell and Poth (2018) described the phenomenological study as one fueled and guided by a sense of “wonder” (p. 75). It is this sense of wonder that guides the phenomenological researcher in exploring and describing the “what” and “how” of a lived experience, while reducing to the greatest extent possible personal presuppositions and judgments about the experience of the studied phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Wetz, 2005).

### **Research/Guiding Questions**

The research question creates a pathway for the research process: the methodology employed, study design, and implementation (Butin, 2010). The primary question of focus in this study integrated both the frameworks of resilience theory and a critical theory on race and gender. The research question was presented as an overarching focus that was supported by three related and supporting sub-questions. Delineated below, these research questions served as active guardrails in exploring how Black women principals perceived and interpreted resilience in their experiences as leaders of schools.

1. To what extent does leadership resilience impact the lived experiences of Black female public school principals?

Sub-Questions:

- (a) What factors and themes of resilience emerge in the unique experiences of Black female principals?
- (b) To what extent has the school leadership experience impacted the development and demonstration of resilience among Black female principals?
- (c) To what extent do gender and race impact patterns in participant perceptions, demonstrations, and interpretations of leader resilience?

### **Participants**

The specific nature of the research focus established, by default, clear, predetermined criteria for participation in this study. Participants included individuals

who represented an intersection of all three of the following categories:

1. individuals who identify as Black
2. individuals who identify as female
3. individuals with professional experience in the role of a public school principal in the United States

For the latter, professional experience in the principalship included both current and former public school principals. This distinction allowed consideration for the growing impact of principal mobility and attrition as identified in a 2018 study of school leadership attrition by NCES (Goldring & Taie, 2018). Principals included in the cited report were categorized as stayers, movers, and leavers; the latter two categories—movers and leavers—represented those principals who no longer served in their original assignments or had moved out of leadership or education respectively. The inclusion of former principals not only expanded the range of participants in the study but also allowed for the stories of movers and leavers to be captured and, thereby, broadened the scope of experiences available for exploration.

Participant narratives of their lived experiences in the principalship served as the primary tool for exploring resilience. As such, it was important to consider parameters that would support both enriched and readily accessible content from which participants would draw references and experiences. Participation criteria included practicing principals who had served in the role for a minimum of 3 years and former principals who had served in the role within the past 5 years.

In keeping with the recommended sample size for phenomenological designs, this study consisted of 10 participants; Creswell recommended a maximum of 10 participants

and Morse (2000), six (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Guetterman, 2015).

### ***Recruitment***

Black women principals were the targeted demographic group for this study. As such, purposeful and criterion sampling was used to recruit and retain participants. Principals in the study were identified using a combination of strategies; among them, snowballing, where initially selected participants help to identify other potential participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), as well as targeted outreach to regional leads. Contacts were secured from each of North Carolina's eight educational regions in an effort to identify principals who met the prescribed demographics.

### ***Data Collection***

While there are a variety of data collection methods employed in qualitative research, a standard feature is the inherent role the researcher plays as a data collection instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Even when optimal caution is applied, the researcher influences both what is studied, who is studied, and how it is studied. The use of focus groups, observations, and interviews are among the methods considered in phenomenological studies. For this study, a semi-structured interview process was employed.

### ***Interviews***

Interviews are among the most commonly utilized methods of data collection across phenomenological studies (Bevan, 2014). Citing DeMarris, Merriam (2009) defined the research interview as a purposeful conversation between the researcher and participant; one where the primary aim is for the researcher to glean knowledge through insight into the participant's perspective on a given experience or concept. Interviews,

though commonplace in the social landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, require a more purposeful and strategic approach when used within the research context (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). In order to better equip researchers in honing their craft as interviewers, Brinkmann and Kvale (2009) identified seven phases of the interview process: conceptualizing, designing, conducting the interviews, transcribing responses, analyzing the data, verifying data, and reporting findings. These phases informed the development of the interview protocol that was used in this study.

Additionally, Patton (2002) identified six basic types of interview questions that are effective in fostering engaging and enriched conversations with respondents. They include questions about the participants' backgrounds, their experiences within a given context, knowledge of the concept, opinions, or values regarding the topic, as well as feelings and sensory-based questions. While the question types were not reflected in isolated interview items, the interview protocol that was used in this study integrated components from these categories and was reflected in the questions presented.

The interview question and prompts were designed in alignment with the two-pronged elements of resilience: a clear articulation of the challenges experienced and evidence of positive adaptation in spite of those challenges. As such, the interview prompts in this study invited participants to share the challenges of leading as Black female principals as well as their experience of persisting, thriving, and growing amid challenges.

Primary Interview Question (guiding questions/prompts):

1. Please tell me about your story of resilience as a Black female principal.

Include the following in your discussion:

- Challenges experienced as a Black female school leader and factors that contributed to your response to those challenges.
- Why you chose to become a school leader and your reasons for choosing to lead in spite of challenges.
- What lessons have you learned as a result of the challenges experienced within the principalship? (How have you grown from the challenges?)

Scholars also provide general guidelines for conducting effective research interviews. They include an intentional effort on the part of the researcher to identify personal biases, crafting and piloting questions for clarity and utility, a commitment to building rapport with respondents, the use of active listening during the interview, flexibility, accurate documentation of responses, timely review thereof, and unbiased analysis of responses (McGrath et al., 2018). In keeping with these recommendations, I engaged in strategic reflection in an effort to identify researcher biases I could potentially bring to the study. These biases are discussed elsewhere in this chapter. During the pre-interview period, the interview protocol was field-tested by a focus group of four Black female principals who were not participants in the study. The focus group met for a duration of 30 to 60 minutes via Google Meet and, after being provided a copy of the proposed protocol, members were invited to provide feedback regarding the clarity of the process and the questions proposed. Central to their task was the goal of ensuring that items were clearly articulated in accessible language and that they were formulated to elicit open and authentic responses from participants. Their collective feedback was applied and reflected in the final iteration of the interview protocol used in the study (see Appendix A). An important contribution from the focus group was confirmation

regarding the importance of a pre-interview conversation with each participant. The group emphasized that the proposed strategy would prove to be of critical benefit in connecting with participants and initiating rapport before the interview.

In keeping with the recommendations of the focus group, brief, preliminary, voice-to-voice conversations were conducted with each participant ahead of the formal interview. These conversations provided an opportunity to establish a personal connection with each participant. For each of the 10 participants, a voice-to-voice conversation, introducing myself and the study, was completed before a formal email request was sent inviting them to participate in the study (see Appendix B). With the use of snowball sampling and the use of contacts provided by other leaders and mentors, six of the 10 participants were contacted by a fellow principal or leader ahead of my initial outreach. This preemptive awareness and frontloading notably improved the level of receptivity to my introduction of the study and the invitation to participate therein. The pre-interview conversations also provided opportunities to review the general background survey (see Appendix C) and other components of the process. This exchange was also intended to serve in a rapport-building capacity and an opportunity to engage with participants in preparation for the full interview. The survey questions were designed to help with confirming participant eligibility for participation in the study. A copy of the approved interview questions was shared with each participant ahead of the interview. An informed consent form (see Appendix D) was also shared, along with a scheduled timeline and options for completing and returning before the scheduled interviews.

### ***Setting and Platform***

In an effort to minimize barriers in data collection and increase access to

participants during a global pandemic, research interviews were conducted by way of a virtual platform, specifically Zoom. The use of digital tools and virtual exchanges have become an entrenched practice among educators during the COVID-19 global pandemic and served a dual purpose in this study: (a) the use of video and audio functions were activated in order to mirror in-person conversational exchanges and amplify engagement during the interviews; and (b) the recording feature provided added benefit of increased accuracy in documenting and reviewing interview responses during the transcription and data analysis process.

Full interviews were scheduled with each participant using a digital scheduling tool; final interviews were formally confirmed in written, follow-up correspondences. Each interview was scheduled for a 60-minute window, but participants were informed to anticipate a 45- to 60-minute exchange. The scheduling tool used, Doodle, allowed me to create multiple available options across a broad range of time, in order to better accommodate the demanding schedules of working principals. All interviews were scheduled outside the scope of the student day; sessions were conducted during after-school and weekend hours. All participants selected the times they deemed most convenient for them, and when necessary, adjustments were made to better accommodate the participant. After completing each interview, I contacted participants to formally acknowledge appreciation for their participation in the study. Other follow-up correspondences included member checking: an opportunity for participants to verify their transcribed interview as a contributing response in the study (see Appendix E). The transcription tool used in this study allowed for a link to be created and shared with the participant.



### ***Role of Researcher***

In addition to the subjectivity of the “researcher as instrument” factor that is inherent to qualitative research, my role as a member of the targeted demographic group engaged in this study presented both benefits as well as opportunities for caution (Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 2009). My identity as a Black female principal positioned me as an “insider” within this study, as it focused on the lived experiences of other Black females who serve in similar contexts within the principalship. In order to ensure greater objectivity in hearing the stories as intended by the participants in the study, I was charged, as the researcher, to hold in abeyance my assumptions about how similarly gendered and racialized principals will perceive their experiences of resilience. Inherent biases and presuppositions were anticipated, and while they could not be fully eradicated, a conscious effort was made to maintain awareness of them and monitor them to the greatest extent possible (Mertens, 2009). Mertens (2009) further asserted that while biases arise from holding an insider status, insiders are capable of interpreting experiences “with a higher degree of cultural sensitivity and can thus yield data of higher validity” (p. 89). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) also pointed to the added benefit of relatability and common ground that can be established when the researcher holds a shared identity with participants in the study. To minimize the tension of balancing the benefits and detriments of the insider standpoint among qualitative researchers, Dwyer and Buckle recommended that the insider employs the use of “disciplined bracketing and detailed reflection on the subjective research process, with a close awareness of one's own personal biases and perspectives” (p. 59).

## **Data Analysis**

Each interview was recorded via Zoom and transcribed using an online transcription tool. The written transcription was used to extract and highlight themes and patterns of meaning across participant responses. This process, known as coding, was completed in multiple tiers and reflected a “winnowing” of the data from broader to more focused details and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The transcription process was supplemented by a third-party, web-based tool compatible and integrated with Zoom recordings. I completed the coding process using a combination of three methods: (a) manual highlighting and annotation by hand using hard copy documents, (b) the use of digital annotations and comment features in the electronic version of the text, and (c) the use of comment and highlight features within the transcription tool. While 45- to 60-minute interviews yielded copious data, the small sample size of this study allowed for a relatively manageable review and coding.

After each interview, I immediately reviewed the recording and compared the audio recording against the written transcription generated by the online software. Edits were made to ensure clarity where the transcribing tool did not accurately capture unique terms or phrases. Saldaña's (2021) recommendation for using multiple coding cycles served as a guideline. The coding process occurred both during and after data collection. After the first three interviews were completed, I began reviewing transcripts and notes for common codes or ideas. As interviews progressed, I made notations regarding recurring concepts shared in participant stories. Saldaña's distinction between codes and themes became notable with each cycle; Saldaña explained that codes are used to connect or link ideas, while themes are the outcomes of connected codes. Emerging themes were

then color-coded, annotated, and cross-referenced, as dominant and focused themes were identified.

Matrices and tables rank among the most commonly used data display tools in qualitative research (Verdinelli & Scagnoli, 2013) and were used to organize and report patterns and findings that emerged from this study.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Research validity pertains to the degree of accuracy of findings reported from the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To ensure accuracy in the findings of this study, validity was rooted in the following practices: the use of field-tested interview protocol, detailed transcription supported by an audiovisual recording of each interview, and the use of member-checking as an added layer of verifying participant responses. The use of member-checking involves transparency on the part of the researcher in sharing with each participant transcribed responses from their interview session and inviting their input on the accuracy of the responses collected.

Reliability in this study was undergirded by the consistent yet flexible adherence to the established interview protocol. While semi-structured interviews can be fluid and conversational with questions being presented in different sequencing, scholars caution that reliability is diminished when questions vary across participants. Toward this end, detailed transcriptions and coding protocol were retained as artifacts and available for peer audit as needed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Completion of the required Institutional Review Board (IRB) application process was helpful in addressing the ethical considerations necessary for conducting research

with human subjects identified in this study. Initial training and certification were secured regarding ethical practices and compliance in the protection of human subjects in research. Among the components that were satisfied with the IRB approval process was the detailed articulation of participant rights and study protocol as expressed within the informed consent form. The document was reviewed with each participant, agreed to, and signed by each prior to participation in the interview.

Additional considerations for this study included the reasonable anticipation that while the research and associated interview questions did not employ a deficit approach in prompting stories of lived experiences with resilience, retelling stories about experiences with gendered and racial discrimination can evoke negative emotions. As such, the implementation of an interview protocol that delineated and clearly articulated the rights and voluntary status of participation in the study proved to be an integral ethical component.

### **Summary of Chapter**

The research process is rendered most valid when the chosen methodology aligns with the research purpose. In this study, the phenomenon of resilience in leadership was explored through the experiences of principals minoritized by race and gender. By employing a qualitative approach and phenomenological methodology, this study established an exploratory approach that supported and aligned with the philosophical underpinnings of resilience theory and critical theories on race and gender.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

The stories of resilience, as recounted in the lived experiences shared by 10 practicing and former school principals across the eight instructional regions of North Carolina provided the primary data set for this study. With its focus on exploring leader resilience among Black female principals, this study harnesses the power of storytelling in order to examine resilience as a construct and phenomenon. The intersection of leadership challenges and the growth forged from, or in spite of, those challenges presents the foundational premise for the stories included in the study. The perceived role of race and gender served as a vital component in framing the lens through which participants interpreted their experience of navigating the challenges they have faced as school leaders.

The study, qualitative in design, was structured with the following research question in mind: “To what extent does leadership resilience impact the lived experiences of Black female public school principals?” Sub-questions included

- (a) What factors and themes of resilience emerge in the unique experiences of Black female principals?
- (b) To what extent has the school leadership experience impacted the development and demonstration of resilience among Black female principals?
- (c) To what extent do gender and race impact patterns in participant perceptions, demonstrations, and interpretations of leader resilience?

### **Participants**

The 10 participants, all Black females who have served a minimum of 3 years in

the principalship and have actively served in the role within the last 5 years, were invited to participate in the study by way of a combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. This hybrid approach for securing participants drew heavily upon the power of networking and connections within and across districts. As one participant (Carole) noted, “there are not many of us out there and it is important to show up for each other.”

Though not examined as a component of the study, the geographic designation for the districts in which participants served included a range of rural, urban, and suburban districts. All instructional regions were represented; however, the markedly uneven distribution of Black female principals across the state presented pronounced challenges in identifying a pool of eligible participants in two of the eight regions where leadership diversity was less readily observed.

Introduced by general and professional demographic data in Table 1, the 10 participants collectively represent a group of veteran educators with an average of 21 to 25 years of professional experience in the field of education and an average of 6 to 10 years in the principalship.

**Table 1***Participants by Pseudonyms, Years as an Educator and Principal*

Participants (by pseudonyms)	# Of years as an educator	# Of years as a principal
Amber	16 - 20 years	0 - 5 years
Baker Langston	16 - 20 years	6 - 10 years
Carole	26 - 30 years	0 - 5 years
Isis Royalty	21 - 25 years	11 - 15 years
Olivia Patrick	26 - 30 years	11 - 15 years
Pearl Smith	21 - 25 years	6 - 10 years
Possible	More than 30 years	6 - 10 years
Shauna Jackson	16 - 20 years	6 - 10 years
Simone	21 - 25 years	6 - 10 years
Trailblazer	21 - 25 years	11 - 15 years

Table 1 lists participants by pseudonyms and their reported years of experience in education and the principalship. Each participant was invited to select her own pseudonym for this study. Many of the participants shared that the pseudonyms chosen reflected particular significance; for some, the names represented a tribute to loved ones living or deceased, and for others, such as Possible and Trailblazer, their pseudonym reflected an anchoring life message or mindset.

Given the sparsity of Black female principals in some regions of the state, even seemingly general participant profiles may serve to compromise the level of participant anonymity agreed upon; therefore, in order to protect the confidentiality of participant identities, I chose to forgo the use of individualized descriptive profiles; henceforth, with the exception of salient excerpts from their unique stories, participants will be primarily described as a cohort.

The semi-structured interview was designed to facilitate a conversational

exchange. The individual interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom and lasted an average of 47 minutes. Emphasis was made regarding the importance of each participant sharing her story in her own words. While each story was unique, commonalities and themes emerged; some were readily evident, others were discovered with additional layers of thematic analysis.

### **Summary of Findings**

Among the themes most prevalent across the stories shared are those of (a) being armored by protective factors, (b) navigating the tension of being armored yet vulnerable, (c) feelings of diminishment, (d) being undeterred and self-agentic, and (e) fighting the good fight; making good trouble. Each of these five umbrella themes encompasses other related subthemes that will be discussed further. Table 2 displays the themes referenced by the participants as they shared their stories during the scheduled interview session.



**Table 2***Dominant Themes as Identified in Participant Stories*

Participants (pseudonyms)	Being armored by faith, family, community, and culture	The tension of being armored yet vulnerable	Diminishment	Undeterred, self- agentic	Fighting the good fight— purposeful leadership
Amber	X	X	X		X
Baker Langston	X	X	X	X	X
Carole	X	X	X	X	X
Isis Royalty	X	X	X	X	X
Olivia Patrick	X	X	X		X
Pearl Smith	X	X	X		X
Possible	X		X	X	X
Shauna Jackson	X		X	X	X
Simone	X	X	X	X	X
Trailblazer	X	X	X	X	X

The interpretation of the data presented in Table 2 is framed within the context of a single conversation on a given day and represents the patterns most emphasized and clearly noted during the scheduled interview. It is, therefore, important to note that the lack of indication of a given theme in a participant's story does not sufficiently support the conclusion that this theme is a missing factor in her lived experience. While all participants were presented with the same interview question and prompts in a uniform sequence, the open-ended design of the interview process allowed for the participant to steer her story in the direction in which she felt led to do so. As a result, each story developed its own unique focus within the context of the interview question and its

embedded prompts. An equally critical point to note is that the themes and patterns identified in Table 2 were not driving forces at the outset of the interview; rather, they emerged as a result of careful analysis of participant responses. The themes identified were those deemed most prevalent and do not preclude the presence of other themes.

### ***Armored by Faith, Family, Community, and Culture***

The concept of being armored is rooted in the metaphor of being protected from anticipated harm. In the context of this study, being armored represents the protective factors of resilience that help to mitigate the impact of traumatic experiences. Among these protective factors are armors of faith, family, and community or cultural support.

**Armored by Faith.** A common sentiment expressed in the stories shared is the importance of faith in withstanding the adversities of leading as Black women. For some participants, the message is implied; for others, references were direct and anchoring. Amber spoke emphatically about the impact of faith and spirituality as a sustaining force in her leadership as a school principal:

My resiliency has been built on my faith. If I did not have the faith that I have, I would have been out of this profession, specifically out of the principalship, a very long time ago. So, my faith probably is my number one resiliency factor, and it is what I've had to lean on a lot to get me through this process now. God is good in that he gives you also some of those tangible things that you need to get through life.

Like Amber, Trailblazer's story was anchored in tones of hope rooted in faith. She described a particularly challenging day where she felt embattled as a result of perceived racial and gender biases. As she returned home that evening, she declared to

her husband that she could no longer endure under the current conditions. She shared,

I was like, no. I'm leaving. I'm quitting. I'm done. And I remember going in my room. And I love music, and the song *Intentional* came on. And I just started crying and boohoo-ing. And, I was like, "pick yourself up!" You know, whatever is going to be is going to be. You will be OK.

The song credited for helping to recalibrate her perspective that evening contains the lyrics,

All things are working for my good.  
He's intentional. Never failing...  
Never have to worry 'cause  
It's working for me, it's working for me.

(Greene, 2015 stanza 1, bridge)

Trailblazer further expressed gratitude for the strength summoned from her faith, declaring that "being a Black female leader is the hardest thing in the world...but thank God a lot of us have faith in the Lord." The impact of faith was also reflected in Baker Langston's reframing of the traumatic experiences of her first principalship. She spoke of how an experience she has deemed the worst year of her life has now become a powerful component of her story. From her perspective, the experience is now rendered more powerful because she has repurposed the pain and has now made it a part of her testimony. In explaining how and why she has grown in spite of the challenges she faced in the principalship, Olivia Patrick shared one of her sources of inspiration: "I follow that quote, 'bloom where I'm planted' or I live by the scripture 'I work unto God and not unto man.' You know, like so I choose to follow my faith." She further explained that even

when she questioned the inequities and challenges in her leadership journey, she always found assurance from her belief that “God meant for me to be in those places.” Anchored in that sense of purposeful guidance, she explained that allowing her faith to guide her has made all the difference in refining her vision and focus as a leader.

**Armored by Family.** The most observable evidence of family support, as an armoring factor for participants, was embedded in the stories of how participants found respite from the trauma of the principalship in the safety of their homes and familial bonds. For these principals, family support is manifested both in relationships presently accessible as well as past foundational relationships from which they continue to draw wisdom and support. For example, while Carole mentioned the positive impact her connection with her adult daughter has had on her professional maneuvers, much of the anchoring familial support she recounted is rooted in the foundational relationship with her parents, who are now deceased. Childhood experiences and the wisdom imparted by her parents were bountifully referenced as she discussed her reasons for navigating the hardships of leadership:

Well, again, I was very lucky to have a mom who was just girl power before it was a thing, you know. Like my mom being a staunch feminist and an avid reader and a corporate executive...in the 70s, with her rise to doing well in corporate America.... She was a civil civic engagement officer. She was funding just these incredible Black experiences in Manhattan.... I was just so lucky to be a part of all of that growing up and watching my mother being a boss...throwing funds at these amazing initiatives that empowered women and Black people.

Carole further explained that her mother’s corporate and social ascent during the

1970s, coupled with her father's success as an entrepreneur in the beauty industry, afforded her a level of exposure that still empowers her today. Being raised in an environment where candid conversations about race, power structures, and equity were commonplace has cemented a value to which Carole still ascribes great premium, as a Black woman in leadership:

So, we would sit and talk about race openly and women and feminism. And I was always reading different things. And, you know, I was a part of an upper middle class Black lifestyle of cotillions and sororities and organizations that my boss did not know existed amongst Black people, because she just thought all Black people were poor Black people. And, you know, just associated poverty with blackness.

And so that was an interesting challenge to work with someone like that.

Baker Langston's references regarding familial support were evident in her discussions about the sage advice of her mother and the sacrificial support of her husband. During our interview, examples of her mother's wisdom and insight were seamlessly interwoven in her reflections about the challenge of being her authentic self when faced with scrutiny and rejection for how her gender and race were perceived by the communities in which she led. Baker also explained that even when circumstances prevented her husband from being able to live in the same town as she did during the first year of her principalship, he supported her in her quest to persevere in spite of the challenges; however, when he realized the emotional and physical strain that resulted from the racial and gender discrimination she was experiencing, he courageously staged an intervention and helped her rebound from the trauma, as she transitioned to a new assignment.

Trailblazer described her husband as an unwavering source of support on both quitting days and victorious days. She recalled his steady leadership and calm assurance when she needed a safe space to vent, cry, or celebrate. On days when tears were warranted, Simone shared that her husband was a safe space for her to share the vulnerability of those tears. Olivia Patrick also reflected on the integral role her husband has played in helping her traverse the jarring emotional landscape of the principalship. She reminisced on the early years of her experience as a school principal and recalled that even then, her husband's support was both practical and psychological, from helping her in various hands-on capacities, such as painting walls and cleaning toilets at an assigned school, to supporting her through the tears, uncertainties, and the path toward hopeful transitions.

Amber described her family as a bedrock of strength and jokingly shared that her husband deserved a financial supplement of sorts because he has been an integral partner in her journey as an educator and principal:

And so that support system would be first my family, you know, first and foremost; using them as a sounding board, using them as thought partners, using them as, OK, I know that this is a safe place that I can share what's going on and it's not going to go anywhere. So, my family has definitely been there, specifically my husband in particular. And you know, I think that, bless his heart, he deserves an honorary degree and a stipend or salary or something, because Lord knows he goes right through this with me and has been since I've been in education since 2005. And that's a lot. It's just a lot.

**Armored by Community and Culture.** Of the 10 participants in the study, four

shared or implied having attended a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), and three spoke openly and proudly about being a member of a historically Black sorority. These references alone are steeped in cultural pride and identity. The references were not made in isolation or as stand-alone statements; they were woven almost seamlessly in the context of the participant's discussion about navigating "otherness" and the power of support networks in ensuring a culture of service to and support for others. Shauna Jackson described how attending an HBCU empowered her to commit to expanding positive racial representation for Brown and Black children within the educational context. She shared,

I grew up in a low socioeconomic neighborhood. So, I went to school, and I did not have a Black teacher, an African American teacher, until I got in high school...And that was 11th-grade year. So, seeing that made me want to become an educator even more. And so, once I graduated, I went to college, went to an HBCU...and pursued my educational career... And so just being in those environments, I knew that's what I wanted to do when I started teaching.

Carole also attended an HBCU and described how that experience cemented her commitment to the power of representation. She then found solidarity in joining a culturally empowering sorority. These experiences emboldened her sense of self and leadership through service. Carole explained,

I never had any sisters, and my mom was the only woman in my life. But when I moved to the south and then pledged into a historically Black sorority, ...that was so exciting [to be] in a city where one of my sorority sisters...was running for state representative. And then she moved on to just be a mover and shaker in that

state. And I had a big [sorority] sister who was just so plugged into the community, so she had us doing all these amazing things, reciting Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni at, you know, events for mayors and politicians. And, you know, like just sort of, the embracing of blackness and of womanhood.

Carole referred to these grounding experiences as “good baggage” which she unapologetically brings with her into spaces of service and leadership.

Other forms of community and cultural support were rooted in informal and formal networks; some borne out of necessity and were serendipitous in their inception. Pearl Smith described how the observance of racial discrimination and questionable practices at the district level sparked a survival response among the Black female principals in her district during the COVID-19 pandemic. She shared,

The Black female principals in my district really decided to network and come together and check on each other because we felt we saw some things prior to COVID where the Black male principals in my district... [we've] seen the numbers of them decreased...So we really felt like as we were watching some of these things happen, we really needed to network with each other. So, we started meeting just to support each other. We tried, you know, we might go out to dinner together after principals' meetings. We have a standard lunch date. So, an informal PLC, if you will, just to kind of stay connected and kind of boost each other. We have a group chat. We felt like we really needed that. The politics in our district are really mmm...noticeable. [laughs] And so, trying to look out for each other is something that we were able to do, and we continue to do.

As Pearl explained, the group first began as a reactive response but has evolved into a



protected and protective network among its members. Galvanized by a shared need for safety and support, they now work to problem-solve together and celebrate each other.

Other participants also emphasized the importance of peer support. Like Pearl Smith, Shauna Jackson has found solidarity in her informal network of fellow Black female principals within her district. She shared that she is viewed as a senior member within the group, and together, group members share ideas and support. Amber's primary peer support has been found in the collegial partnership shared with a fellow principal within her district. For some of the principals in the study, armoring has come from their community in general. Three of the principals interviewed discussed returning to serve in the communities within which they were raised. One of the three spoke specifically about the immense support this has been; she explained that knowing her community and being known by her community has helped her to feel rooted and more purposeful in her leadership.

### ***Navigating the Tension of Being Armored Yet Vulnerable***

The theme of being armored, though powerful and prevalent in the stories shared, also unveiled a corollary theme of vulnerability. It is important to emphasize that the concept of vulnerability, as used in this study, bears no similarity or kinship with the concept of weakness. The term also does not detract from the interwoven and underlying sentiment of the Strong Black Woman Syndrome. The tension of reconciling the state of being strong and armored, without being fettered by the pretense of being impervious to pain, emerged as a familiar struggle for the participants. The terms strength, strong, and tough appeared more than 17 times in the transcript with specific reference to perceived psychological hardiness on the part of participants or Black women principals in general.

As the transcribed interviews were more carefully reviewed, increasingly more powerful references to grit and strength emerged, though not specifically described using those terms. References to confidently fighting, battling, and overcoming obstacles were embedded in each story but so was the admission of hurt, loneliness, the need for self-care, and the need to be “her full self.”

Trailblazer discovered that the advice to be resolute and show no sign of frailty, as shared by beloved mentors, was rendered ineffective and left her more susceptible to an onslaught of attacks from staff. The more impenetrable and armored she made herself appear, the more her own perceived strength was weaponized against her. She explained,

I couldn't make friends, of course, because as Black women, we have to carry ourselves different. And the old regime says you don't get close with anyone. And leadership is lonely...So you got people coming at you on all ends too, because they see the resiliency and they're like, “when is this girl 'gon break? What is going to break her?” So, they start trying everything in the world and they start trying to have, I call it a modern-day lynch mob.

She described the internal tension as a battle between being the strong authentic version of herself and the pull of being armored enough to withstand the attacks in order to get the job done. In the end, she shared her discovery that

you have to be yourself. And you have to trust others to help you.... Everyone's not out to get you; you, you do have to lean on others sometimes. And it's OK because as Black women, we're told we don't need anyone. We don't need nothing. We'll be alright on our own. Well, not in rural areas. We will not be OK...and just like Harriet Tubman had people helping her. We need help.

Because we can't do it alone. We can't survive alone, it will tear us apart. We need the Lord. We need our faith. There's got to be assistance. There's got to be a shoulder to lean on. Because it will break you.

Trailblazer's emphasis on the need for mentors was echoed by other participants who shared the sentiment that being a strong Black female principal does not need to be a singular or isolating journey beyond what it already is inherently. Like Trailblazer, other participants asserted that it is, perhaps, even more important for Black women to be strategically vulnerable in seeking out mentors and other forms of support.

Equally important was the pattern of responses where participants shared examples of caring for their bodies and their mental health as another component in navigating the vulnerabilities Black women face as school leaders. Modeling self-care not only provided a sense of armoring but also an awareness of their own vulnerabilities and humanness. Some spoke with great vigilance about the element of self-care in navigating the tension between being armored yet vulnerable. Carole employed a metaphor of great urgency. She exclaimed,

You're a soldier and this is war. Find a way to take care of yourself. I want to say [that] early in my career, I learned the importance of self-care. I had hired a personal trainer and I learned how to work out properly and get control of my eating habits and sleeping habits and all those things to make sure [that] I was in a good space. Because you are a soldier, like you are at war!

The analogy of fighting was common among the participants. The call to fight for others was prevalent, but like Carole, some participants were specific about the need to fight to protect one's well-being first. Amber spoke about self-care as the first line of

defense and a modeled behavior for the work she hopes to complete with her staff. Isis Royalty also reflected on the concept of self-care and shared,

I really think in order to be resilient, you have to take care of self. And it sounds kind of cliché and...and that is something that again, as a woman, a mother, a carrier of human life, we feel like we have to take care of everyone else. And I really want to stand on the mountaintop and say, in order for you to be resilient, you have to first know yourself. You have to be your first love first before you can pour into anybody else's children. Before you can lead and guide your own children. Before you can speak life into anyone, you have to take care of yourself. And sometimes as women, we don't do that well, and a lot of times we find ourselves not being as successful.

As she paused to reflect upon her own journey, she added,

I stood up this year before I knew it I was standing in the ashes of who I was. And it was OK that she no longer existed. So, I had to be able to accept that, be OK with it. Cry a little. But the woman that I've evolved into came from me being resilient.

Baker Langston discussed her awareness of these sobering vulnerabilities, as she recounted her experience of being a first-year principal in a remote yet affluent region she now jokingly calls the Sunken Place, owing to its open hostility to diversity and the leadership of a Black female. In spite of her most valiant fight to prove herself to others and demonstrate her indefatigable spirit, the stressors during that principalship were far greater than she anticipated and proved both physiologically and psychologically taxing.

There were three times I went to the hospital, cause I thought I was having a heart

attack when I worked at that school. My doctor was getting ready to put me on blood pressure medicine. I remember when I became principal, somebody was like “get ready for blood pressure medicine.” It was another principal. They were like, “your job is gonna be so stressful, you'll need blood pressure medicine.” I was like, not me. Cause I can take anything.

During the year prior to the assignment, Baker had experienced two significant personal tragedies. The losses included the death of twins born preterm and later, a house fire. Having survived these two successive tragedies and armed with a supportive family network, along with a healthy navigation of grief therapy, Baker had reason to believe she could handle anything. As such, she approached the new assignment armed with marked optimism and resolve. She felt renewed hope and did not anticipate the principalship presenting more strain than she had endured from the tragedies of the previous year. She shared, “Now I remember being like [taps vein], I don't know if this vein's working anymore...I think the pressure is kind of high. I'm gonna have to get on up out of here.”

Her decision to move on from that assignment was rooted in self-care and an effort to prioritize her own well-being over the fight to prove she was strong enough to survive a deleterious environment. An animated and engaging storyteller, Baker infused humor in describing her decision to move on from that particular principalship and region:

You know, I was like, this job is not going to take me out. I'm not going die at this desk. So, like, I'm going to work somewhere else. Forget y'all and your desk.  
[Laughs] Because I'm not dying here. And so eventually I went on and moved on.

Simone, who has moved into a central office position within the past year, discussed the concept of self-care in terms of knowing when to stay and fight and when to move on and battle from a different position. In discussing the difference, she explained,

If you're not being your best? If you're being beat down to the point where you cannot do that, the mission or the calling that you are able to do in that particular position, it's time to go! It's time to go! Yeah. Um, and you can. You know, and I have not always felt that way; I was like, Oh Lord, where am I going to work? It's just too much. Go on somewhere else, honey!

Earlier in the interview, Simone shared that she had faced significant racialized opposition in her last principalship. She shared that even with the loss of her father, the attacks persisted, and while her will to persevere was strong, she was also aware that, having done her best in that assignment, moving on did not equate to conceding failure. It is her belief that sometimes the call to move on can produce greater effectiveness.

In exploring the vulnerabilities of leading as Black women, participants also discussed the need to reconcile externally imposed expectations that weaponize our vulnerabilities. The concept of being one's full self was a recurring theme, echoed most pronouncedly by Isis Royalty and Simone. Isis Royalty shared,

I can only do the best that I can. And knowing that it's OK for me to give 100 percent of myself of being a leader, 100 percent of myself of being a student, 100 percent of myself and being a mom. Somehow, we've been taught that in order for you to be a great leader, you can't give all of yourself. And I totally disagree with that."

Simone echoed similar sentiments regarding dispelling the myth of restricted identity:

“People questioning, you know, if you are a mother or wife, how can you do this and do your career? But you also have to stay very, very adamant in who you are and know who you are.”

### ***Diminishment***

The theme of diminishment encompasses subthemes of familiar racialized and gender-based barriers that have impeded the progress of Black women in leadership. The barriers spotlighted in this section include diminishment via ceilings and cliffs (the glass ceiling, concrete ceiling, glass cliff), microaggressions, marginalization, and maligning. Remarkably, diminishment as a theme was evident in every story; the plot, setting, and characters differed, but the general theme of racial and gender discrimination was made manifest in each of the 10 narratives. The various tools of diminishment observed are categorized and explored further.

**Diminishment by Ceilings and Cliffs.** The concepts of the glass ceiling, concrete ceiling, and glass cliff have been explored in the body of literature that undergirds this study. While unique in their definition, these concepts all collectively connote oppressive and discriminatory outcomes for Black women. The term glass ceiling applies to processes and practices that are designed to create a disadvantage for women and can be aptly applied to Black women in education. The term concrete ceiling, however, is used specifically to underscore the heightened oppression for Black and Brown women. As such, the use of concrete ceiling in this section inherently includes both gender- and race-based inhibitors and will be used to the exclusion of the glass ceiling. The glass cliff refers to assignments where there is a high likelihood of failure. In Possible’s story,

examples of both the concrete ceiling and the glass cliff are evident. A veteran educator and school leader with over 30 years of service within the profession, Possible recalls being assigned to a series of challenging settings and unknowingly being left to “be the hammer” in enforcing expectations that had not previously been articulated or enforced. The result was heightened resistance from staff and maligning of her professional character. She also cited an experience of meticulously following her district’s guidelines for school improvement, even amid pushback from her staff. She later discovered that a male counterpart whose school had also received similar performance designation and by district policy was required to follow similar guidelines was released from that requirement. She shared,

He had that same notebook that I did because our schools were low performing.

I'm getting all this pressure about them having to do all this And I finally talked to him, and I said, are you having to do this? No. What do you mean? So why wasn't I...I was a target? ... So, I was being set up to fail.

Trailblazer discussed repeatedly being placed in assignments where she was charged with “cleaning up” a school—culture and performance. As she chronicled her resume of assignment changes, with each transition she echoed the refrain, “here I go again, cleaning up...again.” She described a pattern of being assigned roles previously held by male leaders who she believed had employed laissez-faire leadership styles to the detriment of the school and students. In one assignment where she was embattled by opposition from staff and seemingly minimal support from senior leadership, she felt diminished by the district’s decision to move her after the school had made marked progress academically and in school climate. She recounted the details of her



conversation with senior district leaders where she admitted sharing the following:

“That's what you think of me? I'm the clean-up person and now you're moving me?”

Prior to this episode, she described being invited to apply for another principalship within the district but later learned that the role had been assigned to a White female with inadequate credentials. With each disappointment, she learned more about “playing the game.” She explained,

And so, I said, I'm going to focus on the student. And I'm going to hit the power player. And let them see a different side of me. So that first day, I did some research and I said I'm getting ready to beat them at their own game and I said, it's time to play chess. [Laughs]. I'm going to pick myself up and I'm going to make this school the best that it can be. And when they hear the name, people are going to sit up or they're going to tremble, cause we're going to beat them in academics and athletics!

Her game of chess, as she described it, included an intentional effort at code switching and bicultural leadership. The plan was admittedly scripted at the outset, but this was a part of her new strategy to circumvent enough of the barriers for them to get to the mission at hand. She expounded,

And so, I had to start thinking like a White woman and thinking like a White man. So, thinking like a White man. Meaning I had to get in the ear of those that were the movers and shakers of the school. Not have that wall up, but still be professional, but give them a little insight of who I was. Cut up. But mean business. And so that that's where I found myself.

While this strategy seemingly yielded much success, as Trailblazer was able to

reconcile the new playbook with her own authentic style, she remained guarded and still aware of the diminishing elements used to oppress Black women in leadership. She was later awarded a coveted principalship assignment, and even then, she felt conflicted; armored yet vulnerable, grateful yet doubtful. She explained,

When the superintendent told me that. I was in shock. My mouth flew open because I couldn't believe it.... So, I called my husband, my husband started crying. Cause he knew what I had been through. And I had, I was so excited. And then something came over me. And as a Black woman, we're always paranoid. So, I was like, Is this a set up? Why am I being given this position? What has happened? What is going on? Because the previous principal, good old boy, same thing, let a lot go. And I'm like, here I go again, cleaning up. And I was like, I can't even savor the moment because it's like I got to clean up again.

The following statements reflect sentiments among participants regarding gendered and racialized inequities Black women face in the principalship. Each statement bears the imprimatur of thought patterns created in response to the diminishment from concrete ceilings and glass cliffs experienced by the storyteller.

- Trailblazer, describing how and why she felt compelled to go above and beyond the practices of her male predecessors: “So again, that's one of the challenges you have to overcome as a Black female, you have to know everything. Men can go in, talk shop and everybody loves them. We got to go over and beyond.”
- Olivia Patrick, reflecting on her placement at alternative and challenging assignments:

I think it's complicated being a Black woman, because I sometimes wonder if it were a White counterpart, if they would've—[for] one, they would have never been placed in those schools, would they have been given more support in those schools?

- Possible, the longest-serving educator among the cohort, sharing closing thoughts, as she reflected on her chronicled journey, acknowledging her own surprise on how much and how long she had shared:

No, we just can't, we can't give up because we are viewed differently and...regardless...you're not treated the same. You work harder and people can do things that you can't do. And all of that has not, all that has not changed. None of that has changed. And I don't know that it will ever change.

- Amber, explaining why even in doing her best to meet compliance and prove competence, a Black woman principal will always find that there is an elusive standard for acceptance and competence:

And so that's the piece that's the challenging piece because the rules for us are so different. We're trying to abide by the rules, and we can't take the shortcuts like, like, like *Karen* can. OK, we just can't. [Laugh] And that's the challenge there. That's the challenge.

- Shauna Jackson, sharing a final thought as an extension of her statement on networking a sisterhood of Black women in leadership:

There are so many, um, African American women that I believe have what it takes to be successful in education. And I feel like there are some that

have left just because of the different challenges when it comes to being able to handle the different challenges.

- Pearl Smith, in discussing the overt challenges presented during the transition into her first principalship:

I think my biggest challenge happened when I was serving at the middle school. That was a predominantly White school. At first, I was the assistant principal there, but then I became the principal. So, when I was the assistant principal for 4 years, with a White male principal, things seemed to go pretty well. And then when I became the principal of this predominantly White school, the differences in the community were very, very evident. Yeah, it was obvious that the community was.... They were OK with me being the assistant principal, but not really OK with me being the principal. I served there for six months before an opportunity became available for me to move.

- Baker Langston, recounting the experience of discovering her hire and placement in the “Sunken Place” community could have been an act of tokenism due to the community’s battle with the NAACP:

So, I see what y'all doing, now. You're playing these cards now. Got ya. Check. Check. I understand why I'm here now. And I understood why I was there in the first place. They needed to fill some positions with the appropriate candidates. And I'm not going to say I wasn't the best, the best candidate. I mean, I think I'm a good candidate. I think I'm a great principal. Everybody has room for improvement, but I think I do a good

job and I think I'm.... I really try to do my job with fidelity umm but I remember being like, Hmm. So, I didn't realize the micro political side.... In this place it was probably macro political. It wasn't so micro. I mean, it was overt. All of the politics were just right in front of you every single day, like blatant.

- Isis Royalty, reflecting on her accelerated journey in spite of the odds being stacked against her from birth—being born to an addict, experiencing trauma and abuse, yet graduating high school at 16 years old and beginning her teaching career at 19 years of age. Even with heightened credentials and competence, Isis acknowledged that excellence did not insulate her from diminishing agents of the concrete ceiling:

Well, early on in my position, I felt, you know, just tell people how you feel and it'll happen. And I realized that it doesn't always happen.

Sometimes you have to have that micro political leadership. You have to know when to speak. You have to know when to listen. And then sometimes you know you have to be able to code switch. You have to know when to speak and speak a certain language, depending on the group in which you're operating with.

- Simone, in describing the challenges of beginning her career as a school administrator at age 25, but still finding that, many years later, the challenges she encountered are still prevalent in spite of her experience and credentials:

So, some of the challenges that I face, of course...you know, just being a Black woman and being, you know, just a go-getter at that time or and

now. So, I feel like as an African American leader, especially when you're first starting out, the challenges that you have are some people they may not believe in you as much as you believe in yourself, but that's okay. But then also may not be quite willing to help with much...you know, people questioning what decisions you're making, people questioning, should you be here? Should you be at this table?

- Carol, reflecting on her journey in school leadership and the change in her micro political leadership that has resulted from post-traumatic growth:

Another thing I learned...is to find the right ally. I am sad to admit this, but I had to do it. Finding the right White ally to float my ideas because when they came out of my mouth at a meeting, they were immediately shot down. But she could say it and it happened. There are many initiatives that people are taking credit for because they were my ideas, but the people making the decision would have never let them float because they knew they were coming from me.... You know, so learning to deal with that kind of trauma, all those things that I just mentioned on top of the trauma, just being Black in America, damn!, Like, can we get a break? No! Resilience is everything!

**Diminishment by Microaggressions.** Microaggressions are not always malicious but, regardless of intent, they are always tools of diminishment against minoritized groups. The Black women in this study demonstrated a common understanding that microaggressions are commonplace for Black women in leadership. The examples shared here are those that evoked more than a cursory reference, were specific enough, or were

repeated with similar emphasis by another participant.

For Shauna Jackson, the targeted element was her name. Shauna's legal first name can be deemed, by most, as unique yet stereotypical in phonetic structure among Black American females. This was the first challenge cited; she explained,

Unfortunately, one of the challenges I feel like I had to do was ask throughout this whole time was I stopped using my first name. And I don't go by [*cites name*], I go by my middle name, because I always felt that because my name alone was, I was easily recognized as an African American female, and I felt like in education I was going to lose out on opportunities to grow in the profession, using my name. And so, and you know, I started immediately using my middle name. And so I gained more opportunities. I've gained more experiences. I was provided with opportunities to attend leadership conferences, leadership seminars and just spoke about, you know, how it feels to be African American and working in education as an educator. But the biggest challenge that I overcame was actually understanding that...different people have different opinions about who they should respect in education.

Both Carole and Baker Langston discussed microaggressions regarding the texture and styles of their hair. Both women wear their naturally textured hair in locs, a uniquely Afro and Afro-Caribbean form of expression and hair care. Carole began her loc journey as an assistant principal when caring for her ailing mother necessitated that she prioritized her time spent on caregiving. As a means of self-care and time optimization, Carole began the process of protecting the health of her mane by loc-ing her hair. She expressed feeling hurt and frustration when she learned that the texture and style of her

hair were topics of conversation while she served as the only Black woman on an all-White leadership team. As principal, she now serves in a setting where she does not believe there is as much of a negative perception or misconception about locs but shares that this is still a tool of diminishment with which she has to contend. She explained,

I've also worked in places where it's not just who you know, it's how you look, because if your look is too ethnic or too subversive. And when I speak ethnic. Let's talk about the obvious. I have locs and I wound up locking my hair while I was in that process of being in that big fancy school, an ivory tower. I used to do these things called tree braids, so it looked like a weave, but it was really braids underneath because it just wasn't a weave girl. And that's expensive. So and then I had some family issues where I was taking care of ill family members and needed to do something more simplistic with my hair, but my hair wound up becoming a bit of a statement and things that I was, you know, I just had to worry about my hair being something that I was talked about behind my back, that my White counterparts never had to deal with... You know, my White counterparts never have to worry about the whole hair thing unless they're maybe rocking a pink mohawk or something, you know, they have to be doing something. Not that there's anything wrong with a pink mohawk, but you know what I mean?

Baker Langston shared that she has worn her hair in textured styles (non-chemically straightened) for over 2 decades. She recounted the conversation with her mother that highlighted the sobering implications of the non-assimilating nature of locs and culturally unique styles. She shared,

And then navigating it [the principalship], in my shoes. In my hair. You know,



that's a whole other thing, the whole natural hair thing. You know, I told my mom, I was like, "I'm going to get locs." She's like, I mean, this is my mom, she said to me, "You know what they think about us when we get locs?" I said, "ma' I am not militant." She's like, "But they're gonna perceive you as militant baby!"

Baker Langston also recounted an episode of microaggression exerted by a senior district leader from whom she had expected greater cultural competence and sensitivity. The experience left her feeling particularly vulnerable. The episode was in reference to another element of expression, nails. She described the interchange as,

I remember at one point I was very reserved with my fingernails. I think fingernails are [a]wonderful expression of art. And I never had anything crazy like even the length that I have now. I remember being like, Oh, can't go too long, gotta keep it near the nub, gotta keep it near the finger because they can use anything, you know. So, I remember one time my superintendent was like, 'Those are real fancy nails', and I was like, 'Oh, well, thank you.' She's like, 'They're so, so ethnic!' And I remember being like, What? Ethnic? Ma'am there is no Kente cloth on these nails. Like what are we talking about? Like, what is ethnic about these nails? And it was because I had. I remember I had like a little rhinestone on each one of them, she's like, 'So just ethnic, you know, how y'all do?' And I was like, 'No, tell me, tell me how we do?' And I found her to be someone that I feel as like, not so blatantly like that. So not so overt. But I've learned.

**Diminishment by Marginalization.** The loneliness of the principalship cannot be overstated, nor can the heightened isolation Black women principals face. As with the presence of microaggressions, implied marginalization and isolation were commonplace

in the stories shared by participants. Amber's story and her reflective pauses during the interview magnified this sentiment as she, nearing the end of her fourth year as a principal, described her conflicted thoughts about persisting in the role. In her reflection, she shared,

And here lately, it's gotten to the point where I don't know if I want to persist anymore. I really and truly don't. This year has been a very unusual year. Even though, you know, there are many faces that COVID has shown us -many, many faces. But this probably was the worst year in terms of the school building. It just seems as if...Principals are just there...I don't know, just doesn't seem to be...Sometimes it seems very quiet, district-wide, and that's very different, and um...I don't know why I persist.

While sharing that her passion for the students and the mission of the call keep her coming back, she shared that it is impossible to ignore the reality of the toll this role has played on principals, particularly Black female principals.

You know, I hate to say it, but I just think being Black was a challenge in and of itself. You know, you hate to say that, but what else could it be? I mean, what else could it be? I...when I look back and I remember those, I mean, I can look back and almost just cry because it's been rough. It has been so rough. I don't know how I stayed in it, to be honest, because I think the average person would have ran a long time ago or quit because I've never had so much come at me before, but I think it was being an African-American female that has been a Challenge.

Carole's experience with marginalization centers around feeling dismissed and undervalued. She believes her race and gender are central components in this interplay;

however, she also deduced that advocacy has compounded the marginalizing efforts. She explained,

Because you would think because I have these statistics, I am the only "A" school in my district. I have one of the highest rates of graduation in my area. No, I have the highest graduation rate in my region. You would think that my district would want to take care of me or, you know, incentivize my stay. And I have been faced with situations where they knew that I was looking to go, because I'm one of those people. It's like, OK, I'm not treated well.

Carole shared that she has now purchased a home in her district to prove staying power and a commitment to complete the mission. Prior to the purchase of her home, she would often embark on periods of job searches and would be transparent in her quest. Senior leaders were aware of her queries, but she shared,

Nobody was blocking the door saying, please don't leave. You know, people were willing to give me references to see me go because they just wanted to see me and my mouth out the door because they knew that he wouldn't have to deal with me...questioning decisions that they were making or calling out systems and structures that were not working for my kids to be successful. So, yeah, I think, and you throw color onto that, you know, I mean, let's be real...I don't know.

Another element of marginalization emerged with cursory reference in the narratives: the isolation of being both an outsider within a majoritarian system and a misunderstood insider among a subgroup. Three participants parenthetically mentioned the added feeling of isolation around incidents when other Black females, parents or staff, undermined or behaved disrespectfully toward them. Carole added that the hurt was more

pronounced when alliances were not found in places she anticipated they would be. She explained,

So, I'm coming with baggage of just goodness and support of women, especially, you know, having a discerning eye for women who are doing the things to progress...if it's Black women doing it and.... It doesn't matter which organization, as long as you're a part of something that believes in the mission. That's what that sisterhood is supposed to look like. And it just breaks my heart to see that other women, you know...women who look like us who feel a sense of exceptionalism and a sense of threat because.... Instead of embracing and saying, yes, let's make this happen because we could make things happen. And I guess that's what I struggle with the most.... Everybody is not your friend because it's lonely. It is very, very lonely as an administrator period. It's always lonely at the top.

**Diminishment by Maligning.** The concept of maligning holds similar outcomes as microaggressions of psychological harm; however, while microaggressions are often covert and can possibly not be rooted in malice, maligning actions are intentionally diminishing. Additionally, as confirmed by the stories shared, the pattern of malalignment is aimed at diminishing the target's competence and/or character.

Olivia Patrick's story led, unprompted, to a reflection of her staff's perception of her as a person and as a leader. She explored,

When I sit and talk about it, it's really overwhelming to me to think that really.

Oh, OK. Yeah. So, I think it's a hidden elephant in the room, me being a Black female principal, of a traditional school. I don't know how my staff sometimes

feel. I think they know I'm genuine and I'm open. Yeah. I don't know if they all feel I'm competent sometimes. Because I'm a Black female. And I remember one time, I remember in a nontraditional school, a White AP been an AP for years, she told the White teachers in this nontraditional school, but the teachers, they were majority White. "She knows curriculum. She knows what she's talking about." I'll never forget that. So, once again, I think. You just have to keep proving resiliency. Every day, I have to be resilient and prove that I'm capable of making decisions that are good for kids. I'm capable of pushing you as a learner.

Amber also discussed her experience with the tools of maligning. She believes that for Black women, race and gender are reasons enough to anticipate maligning.

You really are under a microscope all the time. But you have to know how to still be under a micros...be in the spotlight. But you still have to be able to learn how to build those relationships, but just understand that there is a certain limit to it, because regardless of what you say it's going to be wrong.... It's not going to be right. You're going to be called unapproachable. You're going to be called aggressive, you know. So, I think that what my advice would be is prepare yourself to be under attack. And that's, that's a terrible thing to say. But I do believe that that's what happens. You're going to be under attack.

Being armored, she believes, can mitigate the trauma of the impact, as she believes Black women often are forced to "develop that tough skin and you will kind of let it roll off of you"; however, she cautioned that while the narrative that is told may always be skewed and maligning, being careful to be overly professional and mindful of tones is a part of the survival manual for Black women in school leadership. She further advised,

You got to just be prepared for it and arm yourself that is coming, and it doesn't matter, you can smile from here to there and have a smile as big from east to west. It doesn't matter. It just doesn't matter.

### ***Being Undeterred and Self-Agentive***

Self-agency, as it is used in this study, is rooted in the belief that individuals are able to exert varying degrees of control or influence over desired outcomes and that they have the power to initiate action toward that end (Trottier, 2019). Embedded in the stories of resilience that were shared in this study are thematic elements of overcoming, reframing, rebounding, and initiating change. The stories, individually and collectively demonstrate a seemingly indefatigable will to persist even when maligned, misrepresented, muted, and dismissed. Participants shared guiding principles with the underlying message of being undeterred. Isis Royalty shared how both her personal and professional journeys have followed the underlying theme of leading and persisting in spite of the challenges or barriers. In reflecting, she explained,

You have to make life, do what it does. And sometimes you know whether there's a door. You know, people say, if the door opens, you know, go in it, but sometimes you have to kick a hole in the wall and make a door for yourself.”

Simone added the following:

And another thing that I live by is if someone will not give you a seat at the table, carry your own chair to that table. And I've made sure that I've done that through everything in every way possible through my leadership.

Perhaps one of the most notable examples of room-making or self-agency from the stories shared in this study is one shared by Possible. While the example cited

occurred during her tenure as an assistant principal, it underscores a mindset that has anchored her in leadership in the principalship as well. Recounting the episode, she shared,

With all the racial tension and all of everything that was going on. My office was in the other building...I was in my office.... I'm thinking at the end of the day, hey, everybody is just going home because I still worked late then. I just happened to come over to the main building. They were all in his [the principal's] office having this big.... No one even invited me. No one picked up the phone and said, ...Possible, do you want to come over here? That didn't happen. So, I walked in and I saw that. After that, I made sure I came over every day and I just stayed until everybody decided they were going to go home. So, I was not going to be left out again, because I was not going to be invited. I had to invite myself.

For Possible, this example of self-agentic behavior was not simply fostered by the need to belong or be included but in refusing to be dismissed and disinvited when the destinies of children are dependent upon the decisions made behind the doors that were closed to her. Possible unapologetically made it her business to be in the room in order to advocate for the children she served. The retelling of the story evoked laughter during the interview, but the poignancy of the message was palpable.

### ***Fighting the Good Fight—Good Trouble***

A common theme among the stories shared is a focus on purposeful leadership aimed at making an impact for the children they serve and those who will come after. In the stories, this theme shows up in the language of “advocating,” “fighting for children,” “persisting because,” “showing up because,” and “not quitting.”

Trailblazer spoke of fighting for children and for doing right by children during much of her story. She described herself as a fighter who did not mind taking on bullies at any level; she revealed, “I’m the type that’s always been like, I’m going to tackle a bully, I don’t believe in bullying.” Her passion was not rooted in the fight itself but in the reason for the fight: the children whose destinies depended upon her advocacy. She described an episode of her leadership when staff opposition resulted in frequent bouts with senior leadership and others who knowingly and unknowingly erected barriers to the mission of serving the students in her building. She strengthened her resolve and persisted, sharing,

And so, I told myself, I’m going to keep pushing. I’m going to keep fighting no matter if the leadership is calling me or come in here every day. I’m seeing progress with these students. I’m seeing progress with these Hispanic, the Hispanic population, the African American population, the low socioeconomic population. I love these kids and they love me.

She recalled an intense meeting with senior district leaders where the will to fight brought her to tears of anger. Her response to the news of a transition led her to speak up: “I want to stay and fight. I want to stay for the kids!” While the outcome of that fight did not end the way she desired, she did not concede; she simply adjusted her strategy and position.

Simone’s story of resilience highlighted the following purpose for persisting:

We have to keep pushing and continue to make sure that we are in those positions. We are pushing for other people to be in those positions, and we are principals. We are central office staff, we are the teachers. We are superintendents in every way possible because it does make a difference for our children and that directly



impacts generations to come.

Both Simone and Carol shared being guided by the call that “to whom much is given, much is required,” explaining that their role is a part of a greater mission. Simone described the mission in the following manner:

It's my duty to make change for children, all children in the position that I'm in regardless of who thinks I should not be there or how I'm treated or how someone tries to push me out of that seat.

She added that the mission holds both personal and professional implications, sharing that she would do what was right for kids because

I have two African American sons and the things that our children face each and every day, my own children. I am glad I'm in this seat to be able to help other children. So as an African American female leader, it is my duty.

Simone also explained that her mission also includes a call to empower other leaders:

We have to make sure we're helping our African American leaders, our principals, our women. Our men out as much as possible and mentorship is very important for us to stay in this role and also for us to reflect upon, you know, mistakes we've made and share with other people. So, then those mistakes are not made by other people.... So, I think it's very important just to share those things and to make sure that we are looking out for one another and making sure that someone is better off than what we are than what we were when we first started out. So that's very important to me.

Possible mentioned struggling with the notion of retirement because she believes there is more work to be done in advocating for children. She explained,

So, when I say anything's possible, I'm not going to fail when I know that this is the calling that I have. That's why I can't seem to retire. It's at this point, most people are tired of learning what's new. I know that there are great things around the corner. Kids still need somebody like me that believes in them, that if they have that structure and they have someone who's engaging that they're going to have an opportunity to be the president of the United States.

Amber, in spite of the weariness of leading during a debilitating season, is still driven by the call to “always try to do the right thing when I possibly can.” Adding that her reason for persisting focuses on showing up for children, she explained, “And so what makes me go back at this point? I ask myself, I'm like, if everybody leaves, who will take care of the children, you know, who's going to be there for the kids?”

Carole described her mission in the following terms: “I grew up working in my father's store. I had this slight obsession with making the ordinary beautiful. I'm like a pimp of dreams, man! I am a goal digger.” She discussed that having served as long as she has, she is able to be more vigilant about advocacy because, as she explained,

I've gotten to a point now where I'm at that sweet spot, where I'm just old enough to not care because, at the end of the day, not caring means that I'm advocating for what's right for kids and my families, and I was raised “to whom much is given, much is expected” and I have a responsibility to take what I know and bring what I know to make things better for the people that I work for. To call out things that are inappropriate and wrong, whether it's for kids that look like me or whether it's for kids in general. You know like, I just...but especially to have a keen eye for kids that look like me. I have a soft spot for Black females.

Baker Langston shared,

I ended up leaving because I told my superintendent.... There's no wiggle room for me to stay here. I say, so I'm gonna lose my job. I'm going to fight for everybody, or I got to go. That's what ended up happening. I don't care what kind of kids I serve. I do like serving my people, but I like serving children. So, it doesn't matter if they're Black, White, Asian, male, female, whatever trans, LGBTQ. I like serving children. I like seeing children grow and feeling safe. And I told him [her superintendent] that I don't even feel safe here, so I don't know how to make the children feel safe here.

She later shared that in a conversation with other leaders who had expressed an interest in her joining their team, she offered the disclaimer, “I’ve always been an advocate. I’ve always been very vocal. I need you to know that. But I am professional.”

In response to the question of lessons learned amid the challenges of leading as a Black woman, she discussed learning how to navigate and adjust her leadership in order to better advocate for those she serves. She explained,

I think that the experience of working in such a hostile working environment really made me retool my toolbox. I think my toolbox was missing a lot of tools such as advocacy, but appropriately placed efficacy to where I could see where I could make things actually happen. I learned the macro political side of things, you know, so I learned a lot about macro politics and the way things function in small rural districts.... I got a whole bunch of codes now that I switch to, so I've just become a master code switcher. And, you know, I've figured out how to get what my kids need by giving other people what they need. I think that might be

something that I've really learned through this whole process. I get what my kids need through giving people whatever version of me they need in order for me to obtain what I need for my students.

Isis Royalty echoed similar sentiments as Baker Langston regarding lessons in strategic advocacy. The goal of “fighting the good fight” on behalf of students must be strategic. She shared,

So, you have to be able to still be true to who you are, but be able to communicate with folks without one, being abrasive, sometimes even though we know that there are injustices. Some folks are just raised that way, it's not their intention at all, but when things are embedded in people, you have to be smart enough to know that sometimes they don't know better and still get the job done. So, you can't come in and you know, and be too abrasive about who you are. Everybody knows that we're Brown or Black people. As soon as you walk in the room, you don't have to stand up with the fist. You've got to be smart enough to say that I'm going to get what my Brown and Black children need, and I'm going to be smart about it. And everybody's going to leave that room. It might take them a few minutes when they leave. Like, wow, did she just get what she came for? But you've got to be smart enough to [be] strategic enough to get what you came to get.

Interwoven in each story are the lessons learned from the challenges faced.

Interviews were punctuated with both laughter and sobering pauses, as each participant shared her story of how she has persisted in leadership in spite of the hardship encountered as a Black female principal and how she has grown from those experiences.

At the end of each interview, I thanked the participant and provided an opportunity for her to add any closing thoughts she deemed relevant or necessary. The most common concluding thought has been that of gratitude for the mere opportunity to share their stories and the hopeful thought that there is purpose in doing so.

### **Summary of Chapter**

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with a cohort of 10 Black female principals with an average of more than 20 years in education and 6 to 10 years of leadership as school principals. The interviews were designed to provide participants the opportunity to share their stories in their own words under a pseudonym of their own choosing: their story, their words, their naming. The data set, 479 minutes of transcribed Zoom interviews, yielded layered and descriptive data regarding how leader resilience is demonstrated and interpreted in the lived experiences of the 10 Black female principals. Five dominant themes were extracted from their stories: (a) participants' sense of being armored by faith, family, community, and culture; (b) how participants balance being armored yet vulnerable; (c) experiences with racialized and gender-based diminishers; (d) commitment to self-agentic behaviors; and (e) purposeful leadership in "fighting the good fight."

These themes and the stories that envelop them provide insight into understanding the phenomenon of resilience and its impact on the leadership experiences of Black female principals. In the succeeding chapter, the findings highlighted here will be further analyzed within the context of the overarching research question.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Overview**

The resilience of Black female principals has been the primary focus of this study. Toward that end, a qualitative research design was employed to examine the manifestation and perceived impact of resilience in the lives of Black women navigating the challenges of the principalship. The intended goal of exploring their stories of resilience has been to contribute to the existing research on leader resilience and culturally responsive leadership development. Amplifying the stories and contributions of Black women in the cadre of research on leader resilience is an additional yet equally important goal of the study.

### **Participants**

Participants of the study were 10 Black females who had served in the principalship within the last 5 years, with a minimum of 3 years of professional experience in the role. The cohort participants were selected from each of North Carolina's eight education regions; one from each region and an additional participant from the two regions where the state's largest and most metropolis school districts were located. Table 1, presented in Chapter 4, lists the participants in the study by their pseudonyms and professional experience.

The cohort of participants presented in Table 1 reflected a group of experienced educators. Of the group, Possible, with more than 30 years of experience, had served the longest in the profession. All participants had been in education for a minimum of 16 to 20 years, and all but two of the participants had served a minimum of 6 years as a school principal. The group represented a diverse range of leadership contexts; from the

interviews, I learned that leadership experience in all three grade bands—elementary, middle, and high—was represented.

### **Summary of Methodology**

The interview process was designed to create an open-ended, participant-directed conversation around the concept of resilience in leadership. The interview question and prompts asked participants to share their stories of resilience; in doing so, participants were asked to discuss the challenges they have experienced as Black female principals, their reasons for persisting in leadership in spite of the challenges, and the lessons they have learned as a result of the challenges. Interviews were conducted by way of a virtual platform, Zoom, and were transcribed with the aid of an online web tool. Multiple layers of coding and thematic analysis were used to highlight themes from the stories. The stories shared by participants were also used as the primary data set for addressing the research questions that undergirded the study.

Stories of resilience encompassed two pivotal components: a clearly identified challenge or adversity and the corresponding positive adaptations that resulted from that negative experience. In the literature, we explored the analogy of resilience being compared to the act of bouncing forward; this mental model establishes the distinction of moving forward after experiencing hardships. This growth-centered approach to navigating challenges and adversity sets this study and other conversations about resilience apart from conversations that focus primarily on delineating and exploring the challenges experienced. As each story was reviewed, a critical component was the answer to the query, “How did you grow from the challenges you experienced?”; therefore, while it was necessary to explore and honor the stories of challenges and hardships experienced

by each principal, elevating their examples of triumph and overcoming was integral to their stories of resilience. Spencer (1995) and Polidore (2004), whose theories are jointly employed to establish the resilience theory used in this study, emphasized the importance of focusing on resilient outcomes instead of an isolated review of deficits or risk factors.

### ***Research Question***

The research questions central to this study focused on the impact, development, and manifestation of resilience in the lives of Black female principals as influenced by gender and race. The critical focus of the research is presented as an overarching question accompanied by three sub-questions:

1. To what extent does leadership resilience impact the lived experiences of Black female public school principals?

Sub-Questions:

- (a) What factors and themes of resilience emerge in the unique experiences of Black female principals?
- (b) To what extent has the school leadership experience impacted the development and demonstration of resilience among Black female principals?
- (c) To what extent do gender and race impact patterns in participant perceptions, demonstrations, and interpretations of leader resilience?

### ***Data Analysis***

Using the research questions as a guide, the narratives shared by the principals provided layered and enriched insight about the impact, development, and demonstration of resilience in the lives of the Black women principals in the study. The following is an



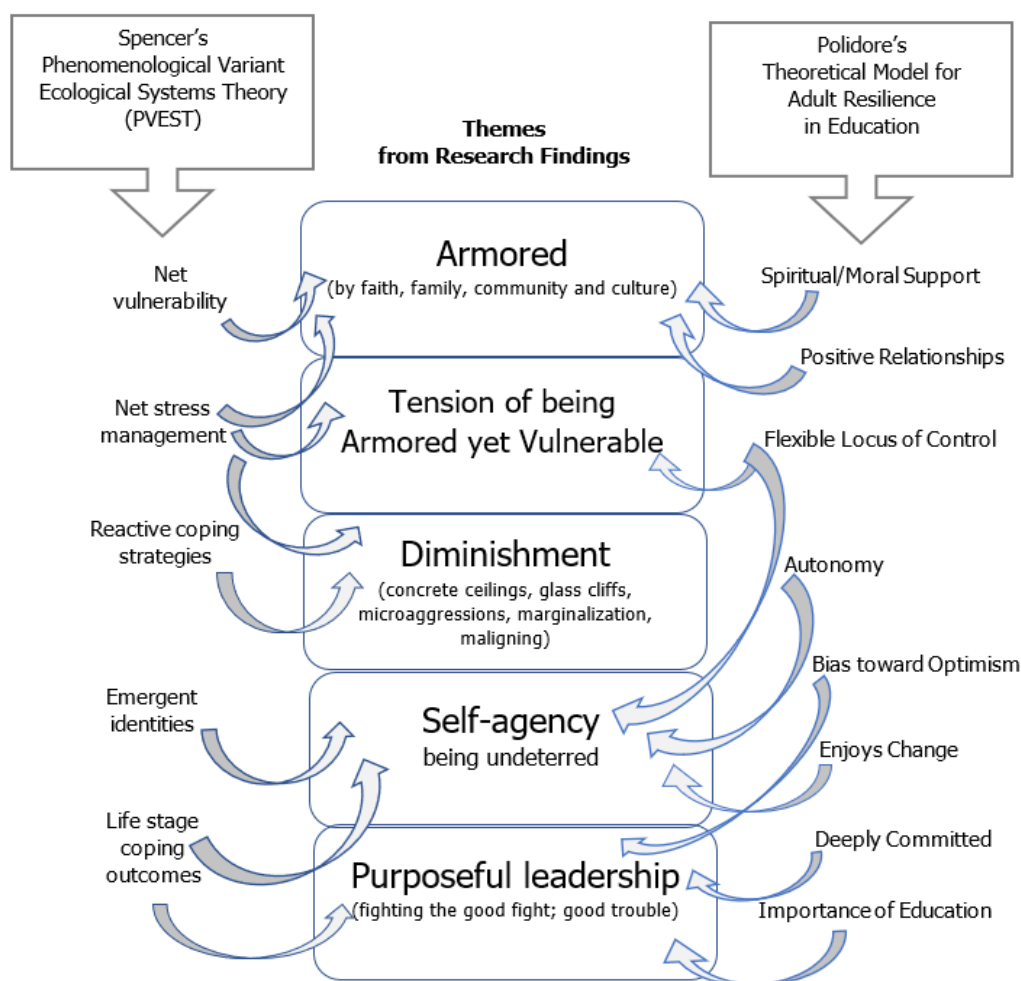
analysis of the findings using the research questions as the primary implements of discovery. The overarching research question is answered in the analysis of each sub-question.

***What Factors and Themes of Resilience Emerge in the Unique Experiences of Black Female Principals?***

The five most dominant themes identified in the study were perceived feelings of (a) being armored by faith, family, community, and culture; (b) tension in navigating the balance of being armored yet vulnerable; (c) diminishment from practices of gendered racism; (d) self-agency, being undeterred; and (e) purposeful leadership, fighting the good fight. The findings that emerged from this study align with and are supported by the research literature on resilience and intersectionality of race and gender in shaping perspectives relative to lived experiences. Spencer's (1995) PVEST and Polidore's (2004) theory of adult resilience in education, used together, provided the foundations for exploring the development and manifestation of resilience in the lives of the participants. These two ecological models explore resilience and identity development with consideration to the influence of race and other societal factors. Figure 2 illustrates how the five themes extracted from the study align with the components of resilience explicated in Spencer and Polidore's work.

**Figure 2**

*Alignment Mapping of Themes to PVEST and Polidore's Eight Characteristics of Adult Resilience in Education*



While Spencer's (1995) PVEST is process-oriented and Polidore's (2004) model of the eight characteristics of resilience is trait descriptive in nature, Figure 2 demonstrates the confluence of both in the themes most dominant in the stories of resilience shared by the participants.

**Armored by Faith, Family, Community, and Culture.** The theme of being

armored by connection to people and access to support systems reflects evidence of the protective factors of resilience (Ledesma, 2014). Within the PVEST model, the positive support of faith, family, community, and cultural empowerment are integral in mitigating the negative impact of risk factors and chronic stressors such as racism and oppressive ecological elements. The net vulnerability and net stressor phases of the model specifically address the role of protective factors in balancing chronic and acute stressors (Swanson et al., 2002). Similarly, Polidore (2004) identified faith (spirituality) and positive relationships among the eight characteristics that were most dominant among the resilient Black educators in his study. In this regard, the participants' expressions of anchoring faith, deep connection to family, community, and cultural support protected them from stressors related to gendered racism and reflected a characteristic of resilience among Black educators.

From Table 2, presented in Chapter 4, it is important to note that during the participant-directed interview, all participants discussed at least one source of armoring. For many, like Amber, Trailblazer, and Olivia Patrick, faith was referenced repeatedly. Amber specifically shared that had it not been for her faith, she would not have persisted in the role and profession. After exclaiming that being a Black woman in the principalship has been the greatest challenge, Trailblazer quickly added a commentary about faith: "Thank God. A lot of us have faith in the Lord. But it [being a Black female leader] is one of the most difficult things ever." Family support or connection was mentioned specifically by all but two participants but was implied by all. Amber described her family as a "safe place." Baker Langston shared, "you know, I think that I have a good family that really helped me to navigate things and to see beyond the

immediate hurt of everything.” For those who did not discuss family connections in direct terms, other forms of armoring by faith, community, or cultural empowerment were sufficiently explored to establish evidence of the theme as an underlying component in their story. References were also made to the armoring of attending an HBCU; Shauna Jackson and Carole spoke specifically of this cultural empowerment as having a direct impact on their leadership. Pearl Smith’s discussion of culture and community support as a protective and motivating component was compelling. Raised in the community and district in which she now leads, Pearl explained,

You know, that culture...is deep, deeply instilled in me and who I am. So, I carry that with me. Everywhere. I carry that with me. And so, I guess there is a fair sense of confidence that I have because of all of those people who are supporting me and have poured into me and are literally watching me do what I do. Their children and their grandchildren or whatever coming through my school, coming through our buildings.

**Armored Yet Vulnerable.** The theme of navigating the tension of being armored yet vulnerable aligns with the net stressor phase of PVEST where acute stressors are mitigated by the protective armoring from the environmental and internal supports. It also reflects Polidore’s (2004) resilient characteristic of having a flexible locus of control. A flexible locus of control is the difference between the empowerment element of the Strong Black Woman Syndrome and the harmful effects thereof; the difference between growth-focused ownership and self-defeatism or martyrdom (Watson & Hunter, 2015). Polidore (2004) offered clarity regarding the difference and explained that a flexible locus of control means one does not assume unhealthy blame or internalize defeat over

matters one cannot control. Inherent to this theme of strength juxtaposed with vulnerability, as presented in the narratives, is the awareness of one's own limitation and choosing to be empowered and not defeated by that realization. In the narratives, Isis Royalty is emphatic about this distinction and shared,

Understanding that again, leaders are doing the best that they can, and I can only do the best that I can...I can still function as a mother and a leader somehow or another as Black females, we've taught ourselves that we have to turn one off in order to be successful. I totally disagree. On Sundays, if I need to minister at church, I'm 100 percent minister. If I need to step out and lead for my school or for as a parent, I can still operate in all of those. Somehow some class, somewhere we've made women feel guilty for being leaders and doing it great, and I totally disagree with that.

Carole, who jokingly described herself as a “hustler of dreams,” greatly invested in pushing others to achieve their goals, shared that even in this noble quest, it is important to establish healthy boundaries and expectations. She stated, “you know, but I've learned to not be attached, attached to the outcome, you can't be, because you will drive yourself insane.”

**Diminishment (by Concrete Ceiling, Glass Cliff, Microaggressions, Marginalization, and Maligning).** In the study, diminishment refers to practices and strategies that are rooted or reflected in racial- and gender-based oppression. As such, the theme aligns with the net stressor phase of PVEST where acute episodes and stressors hold the potential to disrupt the individual's biopsychospiritual homeostasis, or a state of well-being. The depleting nature of this theme restricts it to the first prong of the

resilience construct: a challenging, traumatic, or adverse condition. The second prong in establishing resilience is the positive response to challenges; Polidore's (2004) characteristics of resilience focus on those traits most reflective or influential in the positive adaptation to adversity. As such, the theme of diminishment is the only theme of the study that does not directly align with one of Polidore's characteristics of adult resilience in education.

Diminishment was discussed at length by all participants, as it represented the various challenges and adversities faced and was, by default, a necessary component of each story of resilience. Examples of both chronic and episodic acts of diminishment were recounted. All resulted in varying degrees of abatement, at least initially. Amber reflected on how the mistreatment she experienced as a Black female principal led to the realization that sometimes just being a Black woman in leadership was the challenge. Amber shared,

I don't know if it's just maybe it's me, maybe, but I then look around at some of my colleagues who don't look like me, and it doesn't seem like they have the same struggles. So. Just simply doing a deduction of possibilities, I just think it's because I am who I am, that's been the challenge.

This was a sobering thought echoed by other participants: the idea that there were times when the challenge itself was not a result of doing or not doing but in simply being who she was. Baker Langston, in her reflection on the impact of diminishing practices toward her, shared,

Everybody's always made a point of telling me who I was when they talked about the concerns...I've always been someone that knew who I was. Knew who

[I was] ... Don't diminish my capacity because I am not what you perceive as professional. Don't diminish my capacity because I am not what you perceive is knowledgeable. Don't diminish my capacity because I am not what you perceive as a leader.

Spencer's (1995) model suggests that it is during these moments of combatting diminishment that individuals develop reactive coping strategies: healthy or maladaptive. These coping strategies become a part of the individual's response repertoire and are often applied in future challenges (Adams-Bass, 2021; Swanson et al., 2002).

**Self-Agency.** The self-agentic behaviors recounted in participant stories reflect positive and empowered adaptations to discrimination and diminishment. This theme demonstrates the processes embedded in the emergent identity and life-coping phases of the PVEST model. Self-agency also reflects evidence of the following resilience traits from Polidore's (2004) model: a flexible locus of control, autonomy, optimism, and positive disposition to change.

While most participants shared a sense of weariness regarding the challenging impact of race and gender discrimination in their roles as principal, they remained hopeful in their ability to make a difference. Possible's bold decision to not bemoan the fact that she had not been invited to the daily and informal after-school leadership meetings was an act of self-agency in that she determined that she could not impact change in isolation. She reasoned that those meetings, though informal, held powerful implications for decision-making and politics within the school, and she could not effectively advocate without being in the room and at the table where ideas and solutions were being forged. She argued that her students needed her to be present then and now to

advocate on their behalf.

**Purposeful Leadership.** Scholars assert that resilience is an essential component of modern leadership (Patterson et al., 2009). The resilient leader is driven by conviction and clarity of purpose (Hilton, 2019, p. 24) and leads within the context of willful persistence, not to a position or role but to a greater vision or goal. The life-coping phase of PVEST and Polidore's (2004) traits of commitment and the prioritization of education are all reflected in this theme. The habits and life coping strategies that are developed as the individual persists through the various PVEST phases reflect and build upon a capacity for resilience that is fueled by a deep commitment to one's purpose. These qualities were evident in the stories of resilience that emerged from the research. Participants referred to their leadership as a compelling call, a "mission," or a "fight." Carole and Trailblazer spoke with awareness and conviction of the call to persist even if their advocacy created discomfort for them or others.

Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble. (Lewis, 2018)

Civil Rights leader, John Lewis, is credited with the rallying call regarding the courage to do what is right and necessary even when doing so is uncomfortable. This concept of "good trouble" or "necessary trouble" aligns with the focus of social justice leadership, a form of culturally responsive leadership aimed at promoting equity and inclusion (Santamaría, 2014). Historically, Black educators have ascribed an element of social justice to the education of Black children (Johnson, 2018). This purpose is



reflected in the stories of the participants of the study. Trailblazer asserted that her leadership is anchored in the call to advocate for our children, adding that “they [children] need to see a champion for them, that's fighting for them no matter what's going on in the background because they are our future, and they need to see us in those roles.” Possible has persisted for more than 30 years in the profession and has not yet pursued the option of retirement because of her deep commitment to the students for whom she still chooses to fight. Simone shared the belief that as a Black woman and educator, it is her responsibility and honor to fight valiantly for the education of all children, particularly Black children. For her, the mission is rendered even more powerful because she is the mother of two African American boys whom she hopes someone else finds to be worthy of the fight to persist.

As Simone shared her story of resilience, her narrative at times turned outward, seemingly taking on a motivational and admonishing tone to an audience beyond the context of the interview. She offered the following plea:

And you let people know that you're not going to take people's mess, but you're also going to be able to be tough and know that you can conquer things. And you are able to tell your story to other African American leaders so they too can conquer those things. Because if we all left because of racism or the way that people treated us, there would be none of us in the position. And that is why. That is the plan anyway, for people to be run away out of these positions or for people not to stay around. So that's why we have to do this. For our children. Because they need us.

The stories of the participants reveal a deep-seated commitment to the mission of

being agents of change and vanguards of equity for the children and communities they serve. Knowing how and when to fight is a nuanced component of leading as a Black woman in the principalship. By default, the Black female principal operates as both an “insider” and an “outsider” and understands that “fighting the good fight” is a delicate balance of unwavering advocacy and diplomacy. This strategy of “tempered radicalism” (Smith, 2021, p. 20) is illustrated in Isis Royalty’s assertion that not only is it possible to be diplomatic in methodology while remaining radical in the goal of the mission, but it is also necessary to be both.

***To What Extent Has the School Leadership Experience Impacted the Development and Demonstration of Resilience Among Black Female Principals?***

The participants’ stories chronicle a journey of armoring, an awareness of vulnerabilities, a commitment to persisting through diminishments, building capacity through self-agency, and leading with purpose to transform the lives of others. While school leadership inherently presents systemic and recurring challenges for minoritized groups, the Black female principals featured in this study were able to identify not just what happened to them but how they have grown from what has happened to them. This post-traumatic growth is evident in their lessons in biculturalism, situational leadership, and communication. While they are clear about the deleterious effects of the challenges they have experienced and their opposition to these injustices, they proudly attest to having become better leaders in spite of the challenges.

Baker Langston now describes herself as an expert code switcher who has learned to reconcile authenticity and situational leadership in order to advocate most effectively for the learners and communities she leads. She also shares that the challenges of the

principalship have repeatedly affirmed her propensity for strengths-based leadership. She stated, “but I learned that I was a lot stronger than I ever knew, that I was. Talking about resilience. I use it as my testimony.”

Trailblazer described how and when she found her leadership stride. She shared, I had to come to grips that it was OK to be confident in who I was. And...I wouldn't say worry about what people say but take what has happened and build on it. Don't let it crush you. Look at what could have been done differently. And it's about situational leadership as well and also. It's a chess game.

She further explained, “that's the way I developed resiliency. I had to tap into the mind frame of a White woman and a White male.”

Pearl Smith's concept of her “front row” has emphasized the armoring effect of prioritizing peer support. This has been a learning yield associated with her own post-traumatic growth. She stated,

I always talk about my front row. And so, my front row would be my cheerleaders, my supporters.... You know, I think everybody needs to have some good people in their corner no matter what job you're in. I have to know what my strengths are, and I have to know what my weaknesses are and be able to lean on those who are stronger in other areas than I am.

Shauna Jackson's bicultural leadership has been strengthened in that she has learned to better maneuver cultural hurdles. She shared,

I had to learn how to adapt and.... I've learned how to listen and how to communicate.... I was able to build relationships with all different kinds of people. I felt more comfortable in continuing to grow as an educator.

Simone has grown more steadfast in her will to be undeterred. She has become increasingly self-agentic and more empowered as a leader. She explained,

Some people will tell you no, that's anywhere you go, but I can tell you to keep going. Even if someone said, no, this job may not be for you. I'm going to try something else to figure out what door will open for me? Um, well, what I figured out is I could not worry about what people thought or how they treated me, I have to worry about how I was treating other people and be accountable, you know, I only hold myself accountable, for how I treat other people. So, if people did treat me in a bad way because of my race or because I was a woman, I cannot worry about that. I still had to keep the main thing, the main thing, which are the kids.

***To What Extent Do Gender and Race Impact Patterns in Participant Perceptions, Demonstrations, and Interpretations of Leader Resilience?***

Critical Race Feminism serves as one of the theoretical frameworks used to scaffold the intersectionality of race and gender and its impact on the lived experiences of Black women who are leaders of schools. Anchored in tenets of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Feminism affirms that racism is systemic in its influence within our social ecology and that the intersection of race and gender creates a unique perspective of otherness for Black females (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This perspective is unique to Black women but should not be perceived as singular or monolithic. The stories shared by the women in this study are varied but share commonalities regarding the pervasive impact of race and gender in shaping their experiences in the principalship. Gendered racism was specifically acknowledged and recounted by all participants and has been explored within the theme of diminishment.

Their responses confirmed participant perceptions that race and gender have played a significant role in the challenges they have faced as Black females leading schools.

Amber's declaration summarized this sentiment: "I just think being Black was a challenge in and of itself. You know, you hate to say that, but what else could it be? I mean, what else could it be?"

Findings from the study revealed a pattern of "leading in spite of" and "leading because of." The post-traumatic growth recounted, reflected patterns of persisting and growing in leadership because of given challenges, while some of the adversities experienced warranted a mindset of leading in spite of a negative and discriminatory experience. Shauna Jackson's bicultural communication strategies reflect the former, while Baker Langston's persistence in leading in a school community where KKK activity is rampant demonstrates the latter. Both are evidence of resilient leadership: growing forward and thriving from adversity. In keeping with this mindset is the observable pattern about principal wellness and mobility from the stories in the study, demonstrating that sometimes resilience is staying in the current role and persisting (Baker Langston), sometimes it means moving on to a new assignment (Pearl Smith), and sometimes it necessitates leaving the role completely but finding a new path for achieving the mission (Simone).

### **Implications for Practice**

The stories presented in this study and the lessons learned from those stories are shared with the intention of improving our understanding of how to better support resilient leadership among Black females and to amplify the importance of creating safe spaces for culturally responsive leadership. The dire need for mentoring and support

among principals has been a recurring topic in educational leadership (Thorpe, 2019; Jackson-Dunn, 2018).

### ***Leadership Support***

“One doesn’t have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding is sufficient” (Blow 2012, para 18).

This study and others like it offer proof of the heightened demand and urgency regarding the need for culturally sensitive support for leaders from marginalized groups. Black females, in particular, experience the double oppression of being Black and female. The stories in this study confirm the heightened loneliness they experience and the prevalence of chronic and acute diminishment. These experiences underscore the urgent need for safe and supportive spaces for these leaders to share and develop reactive coping strategies to help them persist and thrive as leaders. Many participants expressed notable appreciation for the opportunity to share their stories. Five of the 10 participants unknowingly exceeded the allotted time for sharing, and some made reference to the unintended impact of unpacking the weight of some of the experiences they had recounted in their stories. Some explained that they had never been asked to share their story, and only one participant mentioned being asked by a senior district leader about her well-being as a Black female in leadership, particularly during a time of racially charged protests and a climate of unrest across the nation. She shared that the senior leader was also a fellow Black female and that the very act of being asked made a remarkable difference. The silence of senior district leadership on matters of race and gender discrimination has inadvertently communicated a climate of dismissiveness with regard to cultural well-being and a lack of responsiveness to the challenges facing Black

female principals. This, in turn, perpetuates the harmful effects of the Strong Black Woman Syndrome, relegating Black women to suffer silently as they lead amid chronic stressors of race and gender-related diminishment (Linnabery et al., 2014).

Baker Langston shared her experience of languishing while leading; she reflected, “And I remember...thinking like, I’d become depressed and [wondering]... Am I like sliding into a depression?” She sought the assistance of a therapist and had spoken to her superintendent about the difficulties she faced in that role, rife with racism and the overt biases from staff and community. In reflecting on the experience, she shared a remarkable conclusion: “I think I could have served there had the leadership been more supportive.” Her statement illuminated the critical importance of leadership support; having described the experience in that role as the worst year of her life, she made every effort to persist and still would have continued to serve had she felt heard and supported by senior leadership. She added,

I remember recently the superintendent of that district hit me up in a text message. Um, I thought it was real, real interesting. He [asked], “did you ever feel like things were racist when you were here?” First of all, I was like...I told you that because that's why I told you I had to leave. 'Cause I told you I couldn't stay here.

Baker shared that she had made a desperate appeal for support during her tenure in that district, but the request was seemingly unaddressed. After a year in the district, she felt compelled to accept a new assignment elsewhere for her own well-being. Years later, the superintendent’s outreach confirmed that her initial request for support was not fully heard, understood, or valued.

This lack of support, though not necessarily borne of malicious intent, is negligent at best and compounds an already challenging experience for Black female principals. Support for marginalized leaders does not demand lofty agendas and idyllic promises. Adrea Kane, a former superintendent and professor of practice in educational leadership, asserted that support begins with acknowledging the presence of inequities and a willingness to listen (DeWitt, 2022). For Baker Langston and others in the study, a valiant first step toward leadership support for Black female principals would be a meaningful check-in. Simone's check-in with her superintendent was transformative, not because they shared similar race and gender identities, but because her superintendent paused to see her humanity and acknowledged the struggle of leading while being marginalized.

### ***Making Room; Beyond a Seat at the Table***

When Baker Langston was hired to serve as principal of a high-performing, affluent middle school in a predominantly White community, she admittedly experienced initial feelings of pride in this coveted first assignment as principal. She was confident in her own leadership potential and aptitude for growth, and the assignment brought with it perceived confirmation that district leadership also believed in her and her ability to lead. With her assignment, she had gained a proverbial seat at the table as the lone Black female principal in the district. She later discovered that her school district was more focused on numeric diversity than authentic diversity or inclusion; the former is physical and readily quantifiable, while the latter requires intentional implementation of practices and policies (Vargas et al., 2018). When districts make hiring for diversity the culminating and overarching goal, diversity management becomes contrived and



perfunctory. Like Baker Langston, other Black female principals have found their seat at the table to be symbolic without the evidence of authentic inclusion where their presence is welcomed, their voices heard, and their input valued. Implications in this regard are twofold:

1. As we approach the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision, school districts have a unique and urgent opportunity to affirm and value marginalized leaders by creating safe spaces and making room in policies and practices for them to feel heard, valued, and respected.
2. The concept of making room is also a clarion call to Black female principals to persist in being increasingly intentional and strategic in the exercise of agentic leadership. As Simone admonished, making room sometimes requires bringing one's own chair to the table or finding another table, if necessary. Isis Royalty echoed a similar sentiment with the reminder, "if the door opens, you know, go in it. But sometimes you have to kick a hole in the wall and make a door for yourself." Doors of peer support, mentoring, visibility, and micro-political leadership may be not readily open for Black female principals, but the women in the study offered proof that self-agency is a powerful implement in the development and manifestation of leader resilience.

### ***Self-Care and Principal Wellness***

I do feel as if my health has been compromised.... I feel as if this level of stress has really taken its toll on me personally. And so...I don't know if I can continue

to allow it to happen and in all good faith of self-preservation. I just don't know how long I'll be able to be in this role. (Amber)

The relationship between self-care and resilience is evident both in the literature surrounding resilience and in the stories shared in this study. Leader trauma and the chronic stressors of navigating the tension and depletory challenges inherent to leading as a Black female are identified as significant threats to the well-being of Black women who lead (Smith, 2021). This continuous strain is connected with the development of racial battle fatigue, a condition that results in the manifestation of various psychophysical symptoms that compromise the mental and physical well-being of those impacted (Acuff, 2018, para. 1). Among the symptoms noted are compromised immunity, elevated heart rate and blood pressure, mood alterations, insomnia, increased anxiety, and maladaptive social behaviors (Smith et al., 2011). Researchers further assert that over time, these symptoms negatively impact the leadership proficiency of people of color, leading to diminished confidence and efficacy (Acuff, 2018, para. 7). Adding to an already taxing leadership context is the pathology of the Strong Black Woman ideology, where the notion of strength is often interpreted as martyrdom. This crucible of self-reliance and a heightened focus on caring for others at the expense of one's own self-care are components of this mindset (Burton et al., 2020).

Amber was not alone in her assessment of a compromised well-being connected with her role as a Black woman principal. Her self-care armoring was primarily reflective and emotional work and required daily intentional grounding. Baker Langston recalled being cautioned about the depleting health she would experience in the role and how those predictions became more haunting when she was forced to make three visits to the

hospital with cardiac concerns. Faced with the reality of the significant and depletory impact the role had exerted on her health, Baker chose to prioritize her well-being and resigned from that assignment. Carole, armed with the knowledge and anticipation of the mental, emotional, and physical stressors she would experience as a Black woman principal, described how she proactively implemented health-related strategies to help her become armored against the trauma of the experience.

Researchers have cautioned that “Black women must prioritize nourishing our minds, bodies, spirits, and souls through the investigation of self-care strategies that meet our unique needs and stresses” (Smith, 2020, p. 20). Isis Royalty spoke of the journey of intentional self-discovery that has led her to prioritization of self-care. She shared,

Not only did I graduate from high school early and I began teaching at 19, I was a wife at 19 and stayed married for almost 20 plus years. I was a mother at 20, so My whole life was kind of fast tracked and.... I found myself being somebody's mom, someone's wife, someone's leader, and I didn't really know who I was. So, at 40, I found myself saying, I think I'm just going to go to the beach by myself, which is so weird. You know, some women are able to, and they know how to do that. I didn't know how to do that, and I found that I've learned how to lead so much better because I now know how to sit down and have a cup of coffee by myself...It's OK for me to just be. Alone.... In order for you to be resilient, you have to first know yourself.

Smith (2020) encouraged Black women in leadership to activate radical self-care through practices encompassed in what she identified as the PRICE approach: (a) the Personalization of a manageable self-care routine; (b) Radicalizing one's self-care

through scheduling and prioritizing; (c) making one's self-care plan Intentional; (d) Capitalizing on the effects of the plan by choosing strategies that nourish the mind, body, and spirit; and (e) Energizing self-care routine by embedding accountability and partnerships. The urgency of the plea is further explicated as Smith (2020) implored, "it is essential that Black women leaders make a pledge to radically take care of ourselves. Radical self-care cannot wait, our bodies and souls need us to act NOW" (para. 7).

This urgent emphasis on radical self-care shifts the focus from being armored *from* the trauma of leading as a Black woman to being armored *for* the collectively-articulated work of advocating for and transforming the destinies of children. The fortifying work of prioritizing self-care as an act of self-agency and self-preservation among Black female leaders can most reasonably be deemed the responsibility of Black women, the demographic group central to Smith's (2020) recommendation for PRICE; however, given the far-reaching impact of principal health and wellness and their impact on students, scholars like Smith who focus on culturally responsive supports for marginalized leaders, asserted that school districts and communities would benefit immensely from championing this effort in support of the Black women leaders they employ and the children they serve.

### ***Mentoring***

Trailblazer ended her story with the reminder that while she believes her sisterhood of Black women principals to be strong, competent, and confident, it would prove deleterious for Black female leaders to persist in the role without the assistance of mentors and peer support. She cautioned, "we will not be OK.... We need help. Because we can't do it alone. We can't survive, it will tear us apart."

Carole discussed the wisdom and necessity of seeking out mentors who may not share one's culture group. In discussing the pronounced isolation of the role as experienced by Black women, she shared,

We're in the top of our buildings and it's lonely. So, yeah, don't block those blessings from people who just may really have your best interests at heart, and you can't determine what gender they are, what color they are, where...those blessings are going to come.... Don't think that all your allies look like you and don't think all your enemies [won't].... Yeah. You know, in my career...some of my biggest support came from people who didn't. So never know where your blessings are going to come from.

Carole's message is confirmed by the literature and speaks to the importance of an openness to alliance-building, both within and beyond one's culture group.

In addition to the benefits of mentoring, research has supported the effectiveness of peer support and affinity groups among Black women who lead (Smith, 2021). The example of Pearl Smith and her colleagues confirms the benefits of peer support. The group united to form a peer support group to “look out for each other” and “support each other” during times of turbulence in district leadership and have continued to serve as a strong support network for its members in mitigating the feelings of isolation and invisibility. Other participants have also remained actively connected to circles of sisterhood. The armoring benefit provided by peer group support amplifies the integral role they play, both as measures of professional solidarity and self-care.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

### ***Culturally Responsive Support for Marginalized Leaders***

Resilience is not cultivated in silos. Toward that end, the theoretical models that anchor the resilience theory in this study employ an ecological approach. These frameworks acknowledge and purport that resilience development and growth occur in a symbiotic design. The Black female principal's dynamic interaction with her environment influences the level of armoring or protective factors she experiences as well as the reactive and life-coping habits she develops. While this study focused on the perceived patterns and behaviors of resilience in the lives of participants, the recommendation for further exploration focuses on the social ecology of resilience development and support.

The stories explored in this study have confirmed the importance of safe spaces and supportive environments necessary for cultivating resilient, thriving leadership. There is now a growing body of literature surrounding culturally responsive teaching and support strategies for working with students; however, queries regarding culturally responsive strategies to support marginalized school leaders and principals yield limited and indirect responses. An emphasis on the growing need for principal wellness has deservedly gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic (Woo & Steimer, 2022). With the rise of racial unrest and vitriol during the pandemic, Black educators have admittedly experienced increased stressors that have been both emotionally and physically taxing (Smith, 2021). As the focus on leadership trauma among marginalized and oppressed leaders increases, so will the demands for viable strategies of support.

For Black female principals, racial battle fatigue, caused by racialized

diminishers, has brought with it physical, emotional, and mental effects that have compromised their health and well-being. As such, the need for targeted support for Black female educators has significantly increased, and the spotlight for support now rests on school districts and their leadership bodies.

Leadership support for Black female principals would prove both ineffective and incomplete without a culturally supportive component that examines the impact of racial battle fatigue and measures of support that help to mitigate the effects thereof. Further research in this regard would prove to be a worthwhile extension of this study and result in building increased capacity for enriched principal support and leader wellness.

Net vulnerability and net stressor describe the anticipated level of mental and emotional impact that trauma or stress may have on an individual (Swanson et al., 2002). They are determined by the extent to which protective factors such as spirituality, supportive relationships, and cultural connections buffer an individual from the negative effects of chronic or acute stress. The positive and protective impact of these armoring factors against the stressors of racial- and gender-related stressors are summarized in the stories shared by the participants in the study; however, the study did not examine the individual impact of each protective factor on armoring Black women against racial and gendered diminishers. Efforts to promote resilient leadership and outcomes among Black female leaders in education can be greatly improved by a commitment to additional research on the measured and perceived impact of each factor in the lives of Black women.

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

The study, with its focus on stories of resilience, did not seek to quantify levels or

degrees of resilience among the 10 Black female principals. Instead, it relied on patterns and themes as self-reported by participants. The themes uncovered were not prescribed or normed and were not intended to be quantified as measures of resilience. An additional limitation of the study is that it did not seek to identify which factors or traits of resilience were most impactful in building resilience among Black female principals.

A small sample size of 10 participants and the use of purposeful sampling within a narrow geographic scope are also factors that can potentially limit the generalization of the findings. Participants, though selected from each of the eight education regions within the state, did not reflect a representative sampling of the distribution of Black women principals within the state.

## **Conclusion**

Stories hold the power to inspire, heal, and empower. The stories of resilience shared by the Black women who participated in this study yield powerful implications for all of the above. As Black women who lead in the capacity of the principalship, they have faced gender and racialized challenges not presented in the experiences of their similarly gendered or same-race peers. The themes of resilient leadership uncovered in their stories are supported by the resilience research and theoretical frameworks that undergird the study. Additionally, the stories shared have highlighted the unique leadership perspectives and experiences impacted by the intersectionality of race and gender.

While their stories of resilience recount the challenges they have experienced as Black women principals, they also provide powerful insight into how and why Black female principals have persisted in growing and leading in transformative ways, despite the trauma of leadership. Embedded in their stories is an underpinning of hope and



purposeful leadership, as we explore the resilience that has been forged through their challenges and triumphs of armored vulnerability.

It is not enough to share their stories without also being compelled to examine the implications for healing and growth, both for those who tell the stories and those who contribute to the environments that shape their stories. The epilogue to their collective story is penned by the actions we now take to create safe spaces and culturally meaningful support that will cultivate resilient outcomes for Black female principals, as they further the work of armoring and stewarding the destinies of children.

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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Protocol**

## Interview Protocol

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

### Armored Vulnerability: Stories of Leader Resilience among Black Female Principals

#### Research Question:

1. To what extent does leadership resilience impact the lived experiences of Black female public school principals?

#### Sub Questions:

- (a) What factors and themes of resilience emerge in the unique experiences of black female principals?
- (b) To what extent has the school leadership experience impacted the development and demonstration of resilience among black female principals?
- (c) To what extent do gender and race impact patterns in participant perceptions, demonstrations, and interpretations of leader resilience?

#### Script for Interview

*Thank you once again for being willing to participate in this interview. As discussed previously, the purpose of this study is to explore stories of leader resilience as experienced by black female principals. The information you provide will be used as a part of my research study and published dissertation with the goal of better understanding how to support culturally responsive leadership development and share the leadership experiences of black women principals.*

*You have confirmed membership among this demographic group. Is that still correct?*  
 \_\_Y \_\_N

*Our interview today will last approximately 45 -60 minutes. A copy of the interview question and prompts have been shared with you for review ahead of this interview. During the interview, I will ask you to share your stories of resilience as a black female principal - challenges experienced, lessons learned and how you have grown from those challenges.*

*The information shared during this interview will be confidential. No identifying information about you or your responses will be shared.*

*You have completed an Informed Consent form giving permission for me to record this interview; do I still have your permission to record our conversation today?* \_\_Y \_\_N

*Do you have any questions before we begin?* \_\_Y \_\_N

*If you have questions during the interview or later in this process, please feel free to share them with me.*

*Also, please remember that you may, at any point, choose to end this interview or withdraw from this study.*

*Are you ready to begin the interview?* \_\_Y \_\_N

Primary Interview Question (Guiding questions/Prompts):

1. Please tell me about your story of resilience as a Black female principal.

Include the following in your discussion:

- Challenges experienced as a Black female school leader and factors that contributed to your response to those challenges.
- Why you chose to become a school leader and your reasons for choosing to lead in spite of challenges.
- What lessons have you learned as a result of the challenges experienced within the principalship? (How have you grown from the challenges?)

**Appendix B**  
**Invitation Email**

Good Morning, \_\_\_\_\_.

My name is Nichole Richardson Ijames and I am a doctoral candidate in Gardner-Webb University's College of Education.

The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in a research study aimed at exploring stories of resilience among black female principals.

The study is titled, *Armored Vulnerability: Stories of Leader Resilience Among Black Female Principals*. It is my hope that the information gleaned from this study will be used to improve our understanding and support of culturally responsive leadership development.

If you are interested in volunteering to join me in this study, please

1. Review and complete the attached [Informed Consent form](#) at least 1 day prior to our interview session or sooner, if possible. (You may choose to sign the form electronically using Doc Hub or another tool and return in pdf format, to [nijames@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:nijames@gardner-webb.edu). (You may also choose to print the form, sign, scan and return by email) The signature portion is highlighted on page 4 of the document.
2. Complete a brief background survey form linked [HERE](#).
3. Schedule an interview session using the following link : <https://doodle.com/meeting/participate/id/wdLP5Mvd> (The dates and times provided here are scheduled outside the scope of the workday, in order to better accommodate and honor the demands of a hectic work schedule.)

Once you have completed the background survey, you will be prompted and reminded to schedule a date and time that is most convenient for you to participate in a 45-60 minute interview.

The interview will be conducted via Zoom. A copy of the interview question and prompts can be accessed [HERE](#).

Ahead of the interview session, I will contact you by phone to confirm and to review the Informed Consent form and background survey information.

I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Nichole Richardson Ijames



**Appendix C**  
**Background Survey**

## Background Survey

### Background Survey for Armored Vulnerability: Stories of Leader Resilience Among Black Female Principals

\* Required

1. Email \*

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2. Are you a black female? \*

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

3. Have you actively served in the role of principal within the past 5 years? \*

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

4. Including this current school year, how many years have you been an educator (teacher, counselor, administrator, support staff etc.)? \*

Mark only one oval.

☐ 0 - 5 years

☐ 6 - 10 years

☐ 11 - 15 years

☐ 16 - 20 years

☐ 21 - 25 years

☐ 26 - 30 years

☐ More than 30 years

5. Including this current school year, how many years have you served as a school principal? \*

Mark only one oval.

☐ 0 - 5 years

☐ 6 - 10 years

☐ 11 - 15 years

☐ 16 - 20 years

☐ 21 - 25 years

☐ 26 - 30 years

☐ More than 30 years

6. To protect your identity, pseudonyms will be used to analyze and report data in this study. Please choose a pseudonym that will be associated with your story and data in this study. \*

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7. Please indicate the most reliable telephone contact information I may use to connect with you in order to confirm our interview session and review the Informed Consent form. (###-###-####) \*

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Google Forms

**Appendix D**

**Gardner-Webb University IRB  
Informed Consent Form**

**Gardner-Webb University IRB  
Informed Consent Form**

Title of Study Armored Vulnerability: Stories of Leader Resilience among Black Female Principals

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Researcher Nichole R. Ijames (EdD Candidate, Gardner-Webb University College of Education)

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of resilience, as shared through the stories and experiences of Black women principals. The study will use open-ended interviews to capture and examine Black women's perceptions of how they have grown from the challenges they have experienced in the principalship. Stories of leader resilience among Black women hold significance in improving our understanding of how to better provide culturally responsive leadership development.

**Procedure**

**What you will do in the study:**

- Participants in this study will be current or former Black female principals who have served in the principalship for a minimum of 3 years and have served in the role within the past 5 years.
- You will be invited to voluntarily enroll in the study. If interested in participating, you will be contacted by email to confirm interest in participating. The main data collection activities will be a background survey and a semi-structured, 45–60 minute interview.
- An Informed Consent form will be shared electronically with you and a completion date will be specified. You will be invited to contact me at any point if you have questions about the form. The form will be reviewed during our initial voice-to-voice pre-interview contact.
- An online scheduling tool, Doddle, will be used to schedule interviews.
- A voice-to-voice pre-interview conversation will be conducted to review the Informed Consent, confirm the scheduled interview session and review the electronic background survey.
- A copy of the interview question and prompts will be shared electronically for you to review before your scheduled interview session.
- During the scheduled interview, you will be invited to share your story of resilience in your role as a principal. (The interview prompts shared with you before the interview will include an invitation for you to share challenges experienced, lessons learned and how the experiences have impacted your growth).

### **Time Required**

It is anticipated that the study will require about 95-100 minutes/hours of your time. Your participation will include email and telephone exchanges as well as a Zoom interview.

You will be asked to:

- Indicate interest in participating in the study (via email response or voice response)
- Complete an Informed Consent form (~10 minutes)
- Respond to a scheduling tool to schedule an interview session with me (~3 minutes)
- Participate in a preliminary conversation to confirm interview schedule, review the Informed Consent form and complete a 4-question background survey (~15 minutes)
- Participate in a semi-structured interview (~45-60 minutes).
- Review your transcribed responses to the interview question and prompts (~10 minutes)

### **Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

### **Confidentiality**

1. Data Collection: Pseudonyms will be assigned and used for each participant to protect your identity. No identifying information will be used in reporting with this study. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom using privacy settings such as individual access code and links, the use of a private setting for interviewer along with the recommendation for you, the interviewee, to use a private setting/environment as well during the interview session.
2. Data Storage: Your recorded responses will be documented and stored using password protected programs and devices. I will have sole access to the computer on which data will be reviewed and analyzed.
3. Data Destruction: Federal regulations require retention of research data for a minimum of 3 years; transcripts and interview responses used in this study will be destroyed from hard drive or portable drives.

**For common scenarios concerning confidentiality, the following text can be used.**

### **Data Linked with Identifying Information**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number (or pseudonym.) The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study has been completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. Zoom interview audio and visual recording features will be used. Zoom settings will be activated to direct storage to a password protected device. An additional audio device (cellphone, recorder) will be used to record your responses for the software-enabled transcription process. Recordings will be destroyed after 3 years using permanent file removal.

### **Anonymous Data**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, there will be no attempt to do so, and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you.

### **Confidentiality Cannot be Guaranteed**

In some cases it may not be possible to guarantee confidentiality (e.g., an interview of a prominent person, a focus group interview).

### **Risks**

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

### **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may help us to understand experiences of resilience among Black women principals and may help to better support the development of cultural responsiveness in educational leadership. The Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

### **Payment**

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

### **Right to Withdraw From the Study**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, your audio (or video) tape will be destroyed.

**How to Withdraw From the Study**

- If you want to withdraw from the study, please tell the interviewer to stop the interview or indicate your desire to withdraw by sending the researcher an email. There is no penalty for withdrawing.
- If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact Nichole Ijames via email: [nijames@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:nijames@gardner-webb.edu).

**If you have questions about the study, contact:**

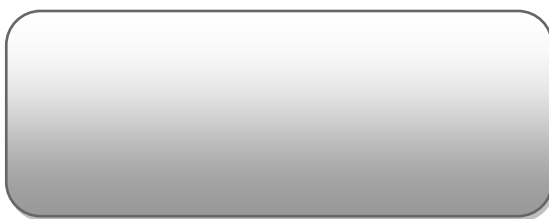
Researcher's name: Nichole R. Ijames



Faculty Advisor name:



**If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.**

**Voluntary Consent by Participant**

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me. I agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.



## **Appendix E**

### **Thank You Email and Member Checking**

Good Afternoon, \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in the study, *Armored Vulnerability: Stories of Leader Resilience Among Black Female Principals*. Your investment of time and your willingness to share your stories of resilience have been greatly appreciated. In an effort to optimize the level of accuracy of the information documented during our interview, I am inviting you to review the transcript from our interview session.

- Link to transcribed interview with \_\_\_\_\_ (link will expire in 5 days)

Although the transcription process is rarely perfect (in terms of punctuation, spelling and syntax), the transcription tools used for this study are intended to capture enough details from our conversation in order to convey an accurate essence of your story. Any specific references to names or other identifying details, while reflected in the transcript, will be omitted from or modified for the purpose of reporting in this study.

If you have any questions, concerns or suggested changes, please contact me by email at [nijames@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:nijames@gardner-webb.edu) within the next 5 days.

Again, thank you for your valued contribution to this study and for trusting me with your story.

Best Regards,

Nichole Richardson Ijames