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African-American Male Principals - Leading for Equity: How African-American male
principals work to create equity-centered
school environments

By

Malcolm Patrice Norrington

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Jabari Mahiri, Chair

Professor Travis J. Bristol

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Spring 2026

African-American Male Principals - Leading for Equity: How African-American male
principals work to create equity-centered
school environments

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By

Malcolm Patrice Norrington

Abstract

African-American Male Principals - Leading for Equity: How African-American male principals work to create equity-centered school environments

By

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University of California, Berkeley

Doctor of Education

Dr. Jabari Mahiri, Chair

Public education in the United States remains a site of persistent racial inequity, where historical and contemporary "education debt" continues to shape student outcomes. While school leadership is a primary lever for school improvement, the voices and experiences of African-American male principals, who remain significantly underrepresented in the profession, are often marginalized in educational leadership scholarship. This ethnographic study explores how seven African-American male principals in California navigate systemic barriers to create equity-centered school environments. Theoretically grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and African American Male Theory (AAMT), this study examines leadership through the intersection of race, gender, and professional identity. Methodologically, this study employed ethnographic interviews to capture participants' leadership sensemaking and to understand how they create equity-centered learning environments.

The findings provide evidence that African-American male principals in California navigate systemic barriers to create equity-centered learning environments by enacting a patterned set of identity-informed leadership moves. I further found that these moves were grounded in ethno-humanist traditions of Black male leadership. Participants contributed textured, practice-near insights into how equity work is sustained in real time: through relational authority, strategic advocacy, and adaptive navigation of interpersonal surveillance, organizational decision-making constraints, and sociopolitical pressures. The study has significant implications for principal preparation programs, district recruitment and retention strategies, and broader efforts to foster inclusive and just educational environments for all students.

Keywords: African-American male principals, African American Male Theory, Critical Race Theory, Equity-centered learning, and Ethno-Humanism

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Chapter 1

Terminology and Language Choices

In this dissertation, I use the term African-American to refer to a historically and culturally situated U.S. ethnoracial group whose collective experiences have been shaped through specific national histories of racial subordination and struggle (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow, and their afterlives). In contrast, Black is often used as a broader racial descriptor that encompasses people across the African diaspora, whose cultural histories and U.S. racialization experiences may be similar in some respects but not identical (Blake, 2014; Thornton et al., 2000).

I adopt African-American to maintain conceptual specificity and methodological coherence with the study's population and historical claims. Empirical research shows that label preferences among Americans of African descent vary by cohort, region, and social identity, and no single label is universally preferred, underscoring the need for transparent terminology decisions rather than assuming interchangeability (Sigelman et al., 2005; Thornton et al., 2000). Using African-American also aligns with the study's conceptual grounding in African American Male Theory, which explicitly centers African-American male experience within U.S. institutions (Bush & Bush, 2013). Consistent with APA guidance on bias-free language, I treat racial/ethnic terms as proper nouns and prioritize participants' self-identification and contextual precision in reporting (American Psychological Association, n.d.-a).

In this dissertation, I use "male" as a descriptor of a socially recognized category that is often assigned and read through institutional and interactional practices, and I distinguish it from "man," which more directly denotes gender identity as a lived and socially accomplished status. Foundational sociological scholarship distinguishes sex, sex category, and gender, emphasizing that "male" and "female" function as socially enforced categories that structure interactions and institutional expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

I use male rather than man because this study examines how principals are positioned within, and navigate, racialized, gendered expectations in schooling systems that often treat "male" as a socially legible category that activates stereotypes, surveillance, and role narrowing. In other words, the analytic concern is not only identity as self-definition but also how institutions read and respond to African-American male leaders as "male," shaping credibility, interpretations of leadership style, and expectations related to discipline and authority (Bush & Bush, 2013; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Consistent with APA guidance, I use male as an adjective (e.g., male principals) to support analytic clarity without reducing participants to biology, and I remain attentive to participants' self-identification and the distinction between gender identity and institutional gendering (American Psychological Association, n.d.-b; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

An exploration of how African-American male principals work to create equity-centered school environments

African-American, cisgender, heterosexual, male, husband, father, educated, educator, brother, role model, and leader are some of the intersections that I navigate. I have experienced education and employment within an education system that inherently marginalizes individuals like me. Pervasive prejudices, White supremacist ideologies, racial biases, systemic racism, fear-based practices, oppression, and capitalist structures characterize this system. These elements perpetuate and reinforce the dominance of the White male patriarchy within our society. Navigating the educational landscape as both a student and a professional educator, I acknowledge my complicity in perpetuating the foundational ideologies that underpin the education system.

It is evident that the education system serves as a cornerstone of U.S. industries, yet its structure and operation largely exclude and disadvantage marginalized communities, particularly African-American students. Throughout my academic and professional career, I have observed and contributed to the enduring disparities in educational and behavioral outcomes among our most vulnerable students. This realization evokes a profound sense of urgency to confront and address the systemic inequities deeply embedded within the education system.

Reflecting on these disparities compels me to confront the sobering reality of my role in perpetuating systemic inequities. It underscores the critical need for transformative action to dismantle oppressive structures and cultivate inclusive educational environments that prioritize the needs and experiences of all students, particularly those historically marginalized. This awareness catalyzes advocacy and collective efforts to foster equity, justice, and empowerment within the education system.

School leadership plays a consequential role in shaping the academic, social, and organizational conditions of schooling. Principal leadership is consistently identified as second only to classroom instruction in its influence on student learning and school outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2006). Principals influence instructional priorities, school climate, expectations for student achievement, resource allocation, and the overall learning environment, thereby indirectly but powerfully shaping students' academic performance and their experiences of belonging, safety, and support (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Research further shows that principals' leadership practices affect professional capacity, parent-community ties, and organizational learning conditions, which in turn mediate student opportunity and outcomes (Louis et al., 2010).

At the same time, principal leadership is not enacted in a neutral context. It unfolds within institutions shaped by historical inequities and racialized power relations. Studies of the educational leadership pipeline show that Black educators, especially Black men, face systemic barriers to promotion, delayed access to the principalship, and underrepresentation in leadership roles, reflecting broader racialized structures within schooling (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Scholarship on Black principals documents how their work is shaped and constrained by institutional norms that privilege white, middle-

class, and gendered assumptions about professionalism, leadership, and merit, often positioning leaders of color as “outsiders within” who must navigate racial politics, surveillance, and pressures to assimilate (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). These studies underscore that principal practice is deeply contextual and embedded in systems marked by legacies of segregation, exclusion, and unequal access to opportunity.

These conditions are especially salient for African-American male principals. Research on Black male school educators shows that their leadership is often interpreted through intersecting lenses of race, gender, and representation, as they contend with racialized stereotypes, heightened boundaries (Bristol & Goings, 2019), and expectations that they serve simultaneously as disciplinarians, cultural brokers, and role models (Brown, 2012). Studies of Black principals navigating contemporary political backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion further demonstrate that their leadership cannot be reduced to managerial or technical functions; rather, it is relational, political, instructional, and moral work carried out in contested spaces where efforts to advance justice often encounter institutional and ideological pushback (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018).

At its core, this study examines how African-American male principals work to create equity-centered school environments while navigating systemic barriers. It operates within a conceptual framework that draws on Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory to illuminate their sense-making, decision-making, and practices aimed at increasing equity for all stakeholders in their school environments. This conceptual framework views equity-oriented leadership as being shaped by racialized lived experience, institutional context, and deliberate action.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a persistent gap in educational leadership scholarship by centering African-American male principals, a population that remains underrepresented in both the profession and the research literature. Second, it contributes to scholarship on equity-centered leadership by placing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and African American Male Theory (AAMT) in conversation with the actual leadership activities of African-American male principals. Third, it has implications for leadership preparation, district support, principal supervision, and school improvement efforts aimed at advancing more just and inclusive educational environments. The remainder of this chapter discusses the problem statement and an overview of the methodology, including the research questions.

Problem Statement

Public education in the United States has long been structured by racial inequity. Scholars have documented how historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral “education debt” has accumulated through generations of exclusion, segregation, and unequal funding for communities of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Although schools are often described as democratic institutions and engines of opportunity, research on tracking, curriculum differentiation, and ability grouping shows that they also function as sites where exclusion, stratification, and differential access to rigorous instruction are produced and normalized through policy, practice, discourse, and institutional culture

(Oakes, 2005). These conditions shape not only the experiences of students and families but also the work of educators and leaders charged with transforming schools into more equitable and inclusive spaces (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Within this context, the principalship occupies a critical position. Large-scale studies have often ranked principals' leadership as second only to classroom instruction among school-based factors shaping learning (Louis et al., 2010). Principals set expectations, organize support for teaching, align resources, and cultivate cultures of belonging, making their leadership especially consequential in schools seeking to reduce inequities and create more inclusive conditions (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). In equity-focused reform efforts, leadership matters not simply because principals manage organizations, but because they shape whether existing inequities are reproduced, modestly softened, or directly confronted through practices such as inclusive decision-making, restorative approaches to discipline, and intentional support for marginalized students (DeMatthews, 2016). Yet, despite the importance of leadership in equity-centered reform, scholars note that the experiences and perspectives of Black principals, and African-American male principals in particular, remain underexamined in the leadership literature (Tillman, 2004).

Research on Black principals more broadly highlights the distinct racialized and gendered conditions under which African-American male principals lead. Recent phenomenological and qualitative studies of Black male principals underscore that their work is deeply relational, political, instructional, and moral, as they seek to create school environments grounded in justice, belonging, and culturally responsive practice while navigating systems that may constrain, misrecognize, or resist equity-oriented leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). Collectively, this scholarship suggests that understanding equity-centered school reform requires closer attention to how African-American male principals experience and enact leadership within racialized institutional landscapes.

As Chapter 2 demonstrates, this gap is historically rooted. Tillman (2004) documents how, in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*, massive resistance policies led to the widespread displacement, demotion, and firing of Black principals and teachers, eroding a long-standing tradition of Black educational leadership and community-based schooling. Recent analyses estimate that between the 1950s and late 1970s, roughly 100,000 Black educators lost their positions as Black schools were closed and white-controlled systems absorbed or excluded Black staff, producing both a representational crisis and a profound loss of institutional memory and leadership capital. Contemporary studies show that Black educators and administrators continue to be underrepresented and face systemic barriers in the leadership pipeline, with Black candidates less likely than white peers to access principal roles even when controlling for qualifications (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Together, this history and current landscape have produced both a representational problem and a scholarly one: African-American male principals remain relatively invisible in empirical research, particularly regarding how they interpret, enact, and sustain equity-centered practice over time (Smith, 2019).

Emerging scholarship suggests that African-American male principals often bring culturally grounded commitments to care, advocacy, and community accountability to their leadership, even as they navigate racialized stereotypes, institutional resistance, heightened scrutiny, and uneven access to professional support. A phenomenological study of Black male principals, for example, finds that participants understand their racial identities as central to their leadership, describe their work in terms of advocacy and transformative care for Black students, and simultaneously report routine encounters with racialized expectations and surveillance (Grubbs, 2021).

Qualitative studies of African-American male secondary principals similarly show that effective leaders embrace dual roles as bureaucratic administrators and “ethno-humanists,” addressing systemic issues while remaining deeply accountable to their communities (McCray & Beachum, 2014). These findings underscore that the leadership of African-American male principals cannot be understood as merely managerial or technical; rather, it is relational, political, instructional, and moral work enacted within systems that often misrecognize or constrain equity-oriented practice (Gooden & Dantley, 2012).

A second dimension of the problem concerns the enactment of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL). Khalifa (2019) conceptualizes CRSL as a framework that includes cultivating critical consciousness, developing culturally responsive teachers, creating inclusive and anti-oppressive school climates, and engaging families and communities in ways that affirm students’ cultural identities.

Recent reports and frameworks elaborate on these domains, emphasizing practices such as auditing policies and curricula for inequitable impacts, building relational trust with marginalized communities, and using community histories and knowledges to inform school decisions (Gooden et al., 2023). However, the literature remains limited in explaining how African-American male principals specifically interpret and enact CRSL’s domains in practice, how they evaluate the impact of their efforts, and how they manage the tensions, risks, and tradeoffs involved in leading in explicitly equity-centered and culturally responsive ways over time (Khalifa, 2018).

Accordingly, the problem is not merely that African-American male principals are numerically underrepresented. The deeper problem is that the field has only a partial understanding of how they lead for equity; how culturally grounded care and community commitments shape their sensemaking and day-to-day practice; and how they navigate barriers at interpersonal, organizational, and sociopolitical levels while enacting CRSL to create more equitable school environments (McCray & Beachum, 2014). This study addresses that problem by centering the voices, experiences, and leadership knowledge of African-American male principals, thereby contributing nuanced insight into how they interpret, enact, and sustain equity-centered, culturally responsive school leadership within historically and contemporarily racialized educational systems (Tillman, 2004).

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What systemic barriers, stereotypes, and institutional dynamics do African-American male principals encounter across interpersonal, organizational, and sociopolitical levels?
2. How do sensemaking, decision-making, and leadership practices of African-American male principals work to create equity-centered school environments?
3. How do African-American male principals interpret and connect the Culturally Responsive School Leadership domains of critical consciousness, inclusive climate, culturally responsive instructional leadership, and community engagement to their work of creating equity-centered school environments?

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to the study. It examines the historical and contemporary context of African-American principalship; the systemic barriers and supports shaping African-American male principalship; the role of culturally grounded care in leadership; and scholarship on Culturally Responsive School Leadership. It also elaborates the study's conceptual grounding in CRT and AAMT. Chapter 3 presents the methodology and explains the qualitative ethnographic design, participant selection, data collection procedures, analytic process, trustworthiness measures, and researcher positionality in greater detail. Chapter 4 presents findings related to Research Question 1 and examines the multilevel barriers, stereotypes, institutional dynamics, and sustaining supports that shape participants' equity work. Chapter 5 presents findings related to Research Question 2 and examines how culturally grounded care, shaped by identity and lived experience, informs participants' leadership sensemaking and daily practices. Chapter 6 presents findings related to Research Question 3 and examines how participants interpret and enact the domains of CRSL, as well as the forms of evidence they use to judge impact.

Chapter 7 synthesizes the findings in relation to the literature, research questions, and conceptual framework. At its core, this study examines how African-American male principals work to create equity-centered school environments while navigating systemic barriers, enlisting support, exhibiting culturally grounded care, and enacting culturally responsive school leadership in practice. Put simply, systemic barriers define the terrain of the work, culturally grounded care emerges as the orientation of the work, and CRSL represents the praxis through which equity commitments are enacted.

In the next chapter, I turn to the literature that frames this inquiry. Chapter 2 examines the historical displacement and contemporary underrepresentation of African-American educational leaders; the barriers and sustaining supports that influence equity-centered leadership; the traditions of culturally grounded care and advocacy that shape African-

American principalship; and the promise and limitations of CRSL as a framework for transformative school leadership.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

At the outset of this literature review, it is important to acknowledge that while certain generalizations may be made about the leadership practices of African-American male principals, they are not a monolithic group. Individual experiences and leadership styles vary significantly, and many characteristics associated with African-American male principals may also be found among their non-African-American counterparts. The qualities discussed are highlighted because they are often observed within the context of African-American male leadership; however, they are not universally representative nor exclusive to this demographic. This review aims to provide insights into recurring themes while recognizing the individuality and diversity of African-American male principals and of the principalship.

I recognize the predictable and persistent disparities in academic and behavioral outcomes amongst our most marginalized students. As an African-American male and educational leader, I am interested in exploring how African-American male principals develop, apply, and enact perspectives, policies, and practices to address systemic inequities and create equity-centered school environments. I am motivated to understand and help mitigate our students' challenges; it is my duty. In this literature review, I address the previously mentioned research questions. To address these research questions, I examine the historical context and evolving role of the African-American male principal before and after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Theoretical Frameworks

I have identified two frameworks that will undergird my research and provide a lens through which to view it. These frameworks are Critical Race Theory (CRT) (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, n.d.) and African American Male Theory (AAMT) (Bush & Bush, 2013). Critical Race Theory offers a foundational approach to understanding how race and racism are embedded within the structures of society, particularly within educational systems. African American Male Theory is specifically tailored to understanding the unique social, cultural, and institutional challenges faced by African American males. Together, Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory will provide a comprehensive lens for exploring how African American male principals resist and navigate systemic inequities while promoting equity and inclusion in their schools.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Rooted in legal studies, Critical Race Theory (CRT) challenges dominant narratives of neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy by exposing how systemic racism continues to structure social institutions and produce predictable inequities. CRT is widely associated with the foundational work of Derrick Bell, whose scholarship helped establish the field's central claims about the durability of racism and the limitations of liberal reform. Bell argued that racism is not an aberration but a persistent feature of U.S. society, and he cautioned that racial progress often occurs only when it converges

with the interests of those who hold power, an insight he theorized as Interest Convergence (Bell, 1980, 1992). This principle is particularly relevant to examining educational leadership because equity-oriented changes in schools and districts often gain traction when framed as aligned with institutional priorities (e.g., accountability, public legitimacy, risk management), even when the deeper moral rationale is racial justice.

For my research, Critical Race Theory will provide a lens for examining how African-American male principals navigate and confront institutional barriers rooted in racial discrimination, highlighting the systemic challenges they face as they work to create equitable educational environments. Additionally, Critical Race Theory emphasizes the importance of lived experiences and counter-storytelling, supporting the inclusion of African American male principals' narratives as analytic evidence, particularly because dominant institutional accounts often minimize, rationalize, or render invisible the racial dynamics principals must interpret and manage (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Bell's work around the use of storytelling and counterstory as legitimate forms of knowledge for revealing how racial domination operates in everyday institutional life is highly relevant to this dissertation.

In education research specifically, counterstorytelling is a well-established CRT method for centering the experiential knowledge of communities of color and contesting deficit narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Principals' narratives, therefore, function not only as personal testimony but as data that can surface how racial identity shapes leadership sensemaking and the strategies used to advocate for equity within environments that may be hostile or unsupportive (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

CRT also strengthens the study's focus on leadership decision-making under constraint by foregrounding the political and organizational realities that shape whether equity-centered practices are supported, tolerated, or resisted. In this regard, Bell's racial realism further helps frame why African American male principals may simultaneously pursue meaningful equity gains while anticipating backlash or limitation within systems that are not designed to redistribute power (Bell, 1992).

CRT is also a foundational framework for examining the intersections of race, power, and systemic disparities within educational environments. Intersectionality deepens CRT's explanatory power by showing how race interacts with gender and socioeconomic status, an analytic necessity for understanding the leadership experiences of African American male principals (Crenshaw, 1989). CRT further posits that racism extends beyond individual prejudice and is embedded in laws, institutional norms, and organizational practices, an argument consistent with historical analyses of educational policy and civil rights enforcement (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, n.d.). Importantly, George (2016) noted, "Critical Race Theory is constantly evolving and is malleable in nature." Critical Race Theory is guided by a few fundamental tenets, as outlined by scholar Khiara Bridges (2019).

- Race is a social construction with real consequences. Race is not rooted in biology but functions as a powerful social classification with material effects, a position supported by scientific findings (including the Human Genome Project) and reiterated in CRT syntheses (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).
- Racism is systemic and enduring. Racism is understood as pervasive and embedded in institutions and policy; Bell's racial realism reinforces the claim that racism is persistent rather than episodic (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).
- Skepticism toward colorblindness and meritocracy. CRT rejects the assumption that neutrality or "equal treatment" produces equity, emphasizing instead how legal and institutional arrangements can sustain inequality while claiming fairness (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).
- Centrality of experiential knowledge and counterstory. CRT values the lived experiences of people of color as legitimate knowledge and uses counterstorytelling to challenge dominant explanations that normalize inequity (Bell, 1992; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

In essence, Critical Race Theory offers a critical framework for unpacking the systemic barriers African-American male principals face, providing insight into how they foster equity-centered practices and navigate the complexities of educational leadership within a racially stratified system. By incorporating Bell's insights, particularly interest convergence, racial realism, and storytelling, CRT provides sharper analytic tools for examining how principals pursue equity within systems that may support reform selectively, resist power redistribution, or misinterpret equity advocacy as deviation from institutional "neutrality" (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

African American Male Theory (AAMT)

African American Male Theory is a relatively new theory introduced in the *Journal of African American Males in Education* in the spring of 2013 (Bush & Bush, 2013). "It is used to articulate the position and trajectory of African American boys and men in society by drawing on and accounting for pre- and post-enslavement experiences while capturing their spiritual, psychological, social, and educational development and station" (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 10). Typically, literature on African-American males tells stories of challenges and negative experiences or cites statistics that detail the plight of African-American boys and men. African American Male Theory explores success stories and invites positive contributions to the lives of African-American boys and men. It is framed from a non-deficit-based model. African American Male Theory is based on the following six tenets:

1. The individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, and events of African American boys' lives are analyzed using an ecological systems approach.
2. The uniqueness of being male and of African descent.
3. The continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and The biology that influences the experiences of African American boys and men.
4. African American boys and men are resilient and resistant.
5. Race and racism, coupled with classism and sexism, have a profound impact

on every aspect of the lives of African American boys and men.

6. The focus and purpose of study and programs concerning African American boys and men should be included in the pursuit of social justice.

African-American Male Theory offers a critical framework for examining how African-American male principals experience leadership at the intersection of race and gender, enabling a deeper understanding of the compounded effects of racial and gender biases they face. While the literature on African-American principals broadly addresses challenges tied to racial identity, African-American Male Theory introduces the additional dimension of gender, highlighting how these leaders navigate unique pressures and expectations associated with both aspects of their identity. By integrating African American Male Theory with existing research on African-American principals, this study strengthens the argument that African-American male principals encounter distinct, layered forms of bias that shape their leadership experiences and practices. This combined race/gender framework provides a comprehensive perspective, enriching the existing literature by contextualizing how African-American male principals advocate for equity and lead effectively within their schools despite these compounded barriers.

This theory will be crucial for investigating how these principals develop leadership practices that are culturally responsive and rooted in their lived experiences as African-American men. African American Male Theory also centers the idea of resilience, focusing on how African-American males persist and thrive despite the systemic barriers they have likely encountered their entire lives (Bush & Bush, 2013). By utilizing African American Male Theory, I explore how African-American male principals lead in ways that support the educational success of African-American students while simultaneously challenging the marginalization they face within educational systems.

The Importance of Representation in Educational Leadership

Representation in the classroom and school leadership is critical for fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments, as diverse role models can positively influence student outcomes and school culture. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (Taie & Lewis, 2022), fewer than one in ten teachers in the United States in the 2020–2021 school year were Black (7%), Hispanic (9%), or Asian American (2%), Black men make up only 2% of the U.S. public school teaching force, and they have a higher than average turnover rate. Additionally, research from the National Education Association indicates that schools with higher proportions of Black students are less likely to have Black principals, exacerbating the lack of representation (National Education Association, 2020).

The lack of representation among teachers, particularly African-American male educators, is a crucial factor that directly informs the disparity in leadership roles, such as school principals. Given that the pool of African-American male teachers is so limited, this shortage naturally extends to leadership positions, exacerbating the overall underrepresentation of African-American male principals. Understanding the challenges

at the teacher level provides essential context for addressing the broader systemic issues affecting diversity in school leadership. Among public K–12 school principals during the 2020–21 school year, 77% were non-Hispanic White, 10% were non-Hispanic Black or African American, 9% were Hispanic, and 3% were another race/ethnicity. Among private K–12 school principals, 83% were non-Hispanic White, 6% were non-Hispanic African American, 6% were Hispanic, and 5% were another race/ethnicity (Taie & Lewis, 2022).

Campbell (2015) argued that with more than half of American public school students being children of color, school leadership should more accurately reflect the diversity of student enrollment. However, the American Association of School Administrators reports that U.S. schools still have significant progress to make toward achieving proportionate representation of leaders of color in K–12 leadership positions (Robicheau & Krull, 2016). The underrepresentation of African-American principals, as evidenced by the data, is indicative of broader systemic barriers within the educational system that marginalize African-American educators at multiple levels.

History and Context

African-American principals have long been committed to educating African-American children and fulfilling diverse roles within their communities (Tillman, 2004). Drawing on Horsford's research, Lowery & English (2022) emphasize that these principals have historically been driven by a dedication to community empowerment, combating systemic racism, and maintaining high academic standards. This dedication has endured across significant historical periods, including the antebellum era, Reconstruction, and both de jure and de facto segregation. Leadership styles and practices among African-American principals have adapted over time, particularly in response to societal changes following the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

The *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 1954*) marks a pivotal moment in the history of African-American male principals. One notable unintended outcome of the *Brown* decision was the displacement of many Black teachers and principals from their positions (Fenwick, 2022). For decades, Black educators had served in all-Black schools, and the *Brown* ruling led to the dismantling of this educational structure in numerous communities (Marcucci, 2017). Given that *Brown* simultaneously aimed to remedy educational inequity and contributed to the dismantling of Black-led school structures, the next subsection examines the NAACP/LDF's litigation strategy to clarify how the displacement of Black educators became a foreseeable outcome rather than merely an unintended byproduct.

NAACP/LDF Strategy, Brown, and the Anticipated Displacement of Black Educators

The *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision is widely understood as a watershed for dismantling de jure segregation, yet the historical record underscores that it also produced consequential, and often foreseeable, collateral harm for Black educators. While Brown's constitutional claims were advanced on behalf of Black children, the resulting implementation battles unfolded within White-controlled school systems that retained authority over staffing, school closures, and administrative consolidation. As a result, integration frequently translated into a reconfiguration of leadership and labor that displaced Black teachers and principals, diminished institutional memory in Black communities, and narrowed Black adult authority within public schooling (Fenwick, 2022; Marcucci, 2017; Tillman, 2004). A brief historiography of NAACP/LDF strategy helps clarify why the displacement of Black educators could be both anticipated and yet not treated as a central constraint in Brown's litigation design.

Prior to Brown, the NAACP pursued a substantial equalization agenda under Plessy-era doctrine, pressing states to address disparities in facilities, salaries, transportation, and curricular resources for Black schools. Fairclough (2004) notes that these equalization efforts generated measurable gains by the late 1940s and early 1950s, yet NAACP/LDF strategy increasingly pivoted toward an integration argument premised on the inherent inequality of state-mandated segregation itself. This strategic evolution elevated the constitutional and psychological harms imposed on Black children as the central litigation focus. This orientation made adult occupational protections (including Black educators' job security and administrative authority) structurally secondary to the principal remedy sought: dismantling dual school systems (Fairclough, 2004; NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund [LDF], n.d.).

Within that strategic context, historians document that NAACP leaders understood that integration would likely jeopardize Black educators' employment and status. Fairclough (2004) argues that NAACP leadership "knew full well" that integration would threaten Black teachers' livelihoods and that Black educators would often "bear the brunt" of reductions as systems merged. Importantly, Fairclough's analysis does not suggest ignorance of this risk; rather, it indicates a sacrifice logic in which movement leaders expected educator losses and proceeded because the collective goal of dismantling segregation for children was treated as paramount. As one integrationist attorney bluntly acknowledged, "there are fatalities in all social change" (Fairclough, 2004).

The implication for this study is not that NAACP/LDF was indifferent to Black educators, but that Black adults were not the primary subjects of Brown's constitutional remedy. The anticipated displacement of Black educators was treated as an acceptable, if troubling, cost within the broader pursuit of educational justice for children (Fairclough, 2004). Archival and governmental documentation further supports the claim that Black educator displacement was not merely anecdotal but structurally produced during implementation. For example, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' report on Southern school desegregation (1966–1967) documents cases in which Black teachers lost

positions when all-Black schools were closed or consolidated and describes how Black educators were sometimes treated as “new applicants” while White educators were not subject to comparable standards (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1967). Such official accounts illustrate how desegregation frequently operated through administrative mechanisms, including school closures, reassignment, demotion, and selective rehiring, thereby making Black educator displacement a predictable outcome of the post-Brown landscape (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1967; Fenwick, 2022).

This history directly reinforces this dissertation’s through-line: contemporary African-American male principals inherit a post-Brown educational terrain marked by (a) diminished Black institutional authority in schooling, (b) a representational and leadership-capital loss produced through educator displacement, and (c) organizational routines that continue to require legitimacy work from Black leaders navigating White-dominant systems (Tillman, 2004; Fenwick, 2022). In practical terms, the legacy of post-Brown displacement helps explain why African-American male principals may encounter heightened scrutiny, stereotype-based role narrowing, and systemic constraints that complicate equity-centered reform, conditions that echo the broader historical pattern in which Black educational leadership is simultaneously relied upon and structurally constrained. Accordingly, understanding how African-American male principals lead for equity today requires situating their work within this inherited historical landscape of displacement, misrecognition, and contested authority, precisely the context this study examines as principals enact culturally responsive leadership, build inclusive climates, and challenge inequitable systems in contemporary schooling (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Misogynoir and Gendered Authority in Pre-Brown Black School Leadership

Education-history scholarship demonstrates that segregated Black schools often functioned as civic institutions, and Black school leadership extended beyond instructional supervision into community governance, resource mobilization, and political navigation under conditions of structural deprivation (Anderson, 1988; Walker & Byas, 2009). Within this “closed system” of Black schooling, principals frequently served as community-anchored leaders whose influence included shaping school culture, mediating conflict, and representing Black educational interests amid White-controlled policy structures (Tillman, 2004).

This “history of history” also underscores that Black women were foundational to Black educational life as teachers and community advocates and, in many contexts, exercised substantial instructional leadership through roles such as Jeanes supervisors, work that blended teacher development, community outreach, and school improvement in rural Black schooling (Fultz, 1995; Jones-Branch, 2019). Yet across U.S. educational systems, administration was historically coded as masculinized “executive” work while teaching was feminized, producing an enduring gender hierarchy in the distribution and prestige of formal authority (Blount, 1998; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Although “misogynoir” is a contemporary term, using it to interpret pre-1954 educational contexts is analytically appropriate because it names a historically durable intersectional structure, anti-Black racism and misogyny operating together to shape how Black

women's authority is read and regulated (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). Intersectionality provides the methodological rationale for applying such concepts across historical periods: the aim is not to claim historical actors used the term, but to interpret how race and gender functioned together as structuring forces in institutional life (Crenshaw, 1989).

In segregated systems where the principalship carried heightened public authority, discipline, external negotiation, and institutional representation, misogynoir sharpens a "sex-role sorting" explanation by clarifying why Black women's leadership legitimacy could be especially precarious. Sexism helps explain women's exclusion from formal administration generally; misogynoir helps explain why Black women's authority could be more readily delegitimized through moralized scrutiny and stereotype-saturated readings of leadership "fit," even when Black women's community leadership was indispensable (Bailey & Trudy, 2018; Blount, 1998).

This pre-Brown gendered landscape matters for this dissertation's through-line because post-Brown desegregation and school consolidation did not occur on a neutral field; it unfolded atop long-standing racial and gender hierarchies in schooling. In the present study, participants' accounts of surveillance, credibility discounting, and stereotype-based role narrowing can be read as contemporary manifestations of this inherited terrain, a post-Brown system in which Black educational authority was structurally diminished, and Black leaders must routinely establish legitimacy while enacting equity-centered practices.

Against this historical backdrop of African-American principals' longstanding community-anchored leadership and the disruptive reorganization of African-American educational authority following Brown and subsequent displacement, it is necessary to note how African-American educators and families shaped schooling before Brown and how their influence and institutional standing shifted in the post-Brown era.

Firstly, before Brown, teachers, principals, and parents were the primary influences shaping the education of Black children (Lowery & English, 2022). The leadership of African-American principals was deeply rooted in fostering relationships, engaging with the community, and advocating for social justice. African-American principals typically led segregated schools and served as community leaders within predominantly Black environments. After Brown, they faced the challenge of operating within newly integrated schools, often with diminished authority and representation due to their displacement during desegregation (Fenwick, 2022).

Secondly, African-American principals' contributions to educational leadership theory and practice have continued to evolve in the post-Brown era (Tillman, 2004). These leaders recognize the importance of engaging both internal and external stakeholders, leveraging these relationships to guide their practice while representing the Black community. Reed (2012) highlights how contemporary African-American principals employ diverse leadership styles, including "tempered radical" approaches, to confront systemic injustices within their schools. African-American principals are widely regarded

as authoritative figures on educational, social, and economic issues. They understand the critical importance of equitable educational opportunities and have historically been responsible for establishing all-African-American schools as cultural symbols within their communities (Lowery & English, 2022).

Finally, the Brown decision is significant because it aimed to address educational inequities, thereby enabling African-American principals to continue their work under improved social and educational conditions (Marcucci, 2017). The post-Brown decline in the number of African-American principals and teachers, as documented by Fenwick (2022), significantly reduced the presence of African-American educators in classrooms and leadership roles. This loss not only diminished representation but also deprived many schools of crucial advocates for African-American students. The resulting leadership gap weakened African-American principals' capacity to influence equitable educational practices during desegregation, with long-lasting effects on academic outcomes, especially in predominantly African-American communities where principals had previously played key advocacy roles. This historical context highlights the ongoing importance of principal leadership, as research continues to emphasize their critical role in promoting academic achievement, positive school climate, and teacher satisfaction (Grissom et al., 2021). The enduring legacy of the loss of African-American leadership underscores the need for a more diverse leadership pool to foster positive educational outcomes, particularly in underserved areas.

Grissom et al. (2021) argue that producing equitable outcomes requires principals to demonstrate a strong commitment to equity. This involves creating environments where all students are treated fairly, removing barriers to success, and ensuring that resources, human, financial, and material, are allocated to meet students' diverse needs. They also note that although student populations have become increasingly diverse, leadership positions, especially principals, have not kept pace, resulting in a widening gap between the racial and ethnic backgrounds of students and their school leaders.

Barriers, Challenges, and Support

Having examined the historical foundations and beliefs that influence African-American male principals, particularly their longstanding roles as community leaders and advocates, it is crucial to contextualize the contemporary challenges they face within the educational landscape. As previously noted, however, not all African-American male principals embody the specific attributes previously discussed. Furthermore, these leadership qualities are not exclusive to African-American male principals; some non-African-American male principals may also demonstrate similar traits. Therefore, while these characteristics may be prominent in the leadership of African-American male principals, they are not universally representative nor confined to this demographic. This domain will examine the barriers, challenges, and supports that African-American male principals face in their roles. While their foundational beliefs are anchored in a legacy of multifaceted leadership and community care, these principals often encounter significant obstacles rooted in systemic racism, cultural biases, and institutional

inequities. Despite these challenges, they find strength and resilience through various support systems, including mentorship, community networks, and affinity groups. This domain highlights the continuity between the historical roles of African-American male principals and the individual and institutional barriers they face, while also acknowledging the ongoing support structures and partnerships that empower them to lead the creation of equity-centered school environments.

Bryk et al. (2015) argued that recognizing the systemic structures and dynamics is a crucial prerequisite for initiating change; however, it is not sufficient on its own to envision transformative solutions. The literature consistently identifies themes of racism, microaggressions, and a lack of support and trust in African-American male principals' leadership abilities as significant obstacles (Khalifa et al., 2016). Conversely, supportive elements such as mentorship, affinity groups, and community networks emerge as vital resources that help these leaders navigate and overcome these barriers (Griffin & Reddick, 2011).

Barriers and Challenges

A study by the Albert Shanker Institute found that only 11% of Black male educators aspire to become school principals, citing lack of support and opportunity as primary barriers (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015). A report by the Center for American Progress highlighted that African-American male educators are often disproportionately assigned to schools with high poverty rates and low academic performance, limiting their leadership opportunities (Center for American Progress, 2020). The journey to leadership for Black male educators is often marked by systemic challenges and barriers (McGuire, 2024), such as racism, biases, and institutional inequities.

African-American male principals encounter unique stereotypes that influence their leadership experience and differ from those their female counterparts face. These stereotypes, rooted in racial and gender biases, often cast African-American men as "aggressive" or "intimidating," which can hinder their interactions with students, staff, and parents. For instance, Johnson (2006) highlights that African-American male principals are often perceived through the lens of societal fears, which may lead colleagues to misinterpret assertive leadership as overly authoritarian or threatening. This stereotype necessitates a more cautious approach to assertiveness than might be required from differently raced/gendered principals, who do not typically face the same characterization.

Moreover, African-American male principals often confront the "absent father" stereotype, a bias suggesting that African-American men lack commitment or involvement in familial and community roles (Dancy & Brown, 2008). This stereotype can undermine the credibility of African-American male principals as nurturing figures within the school, limiting their capacity to fulfill mentor roles. African-American female principals are less frequently subject to these specific stereotypes, as they are often viewed within the context of maternal caregiving, a perception that more readily aligns with nurturing roles (Tillman, 2004).

Lastly, African-American male principals often face stereotypes related to hyper-masculinity, wherein they are expected to display strength without vulnerability (Howard, 2014). This expectation can limit their ability to openly express empathy or seek collaborative support, essential components of effective leadership. The compounded effects of these stereotypes uniquely challenge African-American male principals, demanding that they continuously negotiate these biases to establish effective and authentic leadership.

Viewed through the lens of Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory, the stereotypes faced by African-American male principals reveal the compounded effects of racial and gender biases that influence their leadership experiences in unique ways. Critical Race Theory emphasizes that racism is embedded within societal structures, including educational institutions, which can perpetuate implicit biases that cast African-American male principals as "aggressive" or "intimidating" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

African American Male Theory underscores how these stereotypes shape their leadership journey, challenging them to navigate societal expectations of Black masculinity while fulfilling their roles as school leaders. Thus, both Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory reveal how these stereotypes not only challenge African-American male principals personally but also impact the institutional dynamics within schools, perpetuating systemic inequities by constraining authentic and effective leadership practices in a manner that aligns with racial and gendered expectations. By framing these challenges through Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory, we gain a deeper understanding of how African-American male principals must navigate systemic biases to create inclusive and equitable school environments.

African-American school principals encounter numerous challenges and barriers in their efforts to create equity-centered sites, primarily due to historical systemic inequities, insufficient support, and a lack of cultural understanding rooted in race and racism. Horsford (2009) articulated that "race is always going to be a factor in this country" and described public schools as "tools to craft a caste system" that divides society along racial and socioeconomic lines.

The statement "race is always going to be a factor in this country" and the characterization of public schools as "tools to craft a caste system" align closely with both Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory. Critical Race Theory posits that racism is a permanent and profoundly ingrained element of American society, embedded within legal, educational, and social institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The notion that race will always be a factor underscores Critical Race Theory's claim that racism is not episodic but systemic, manifesting in public schools that reinforce social hierarchies, much like a caste system. Public schools, as described, become mechanisms for perpetuating racial inequalities, disadvantaging students of color through unequal access to resources, opportunities, and quality education.

African American Male Theory explicitly highlights the unique experiences of African-American males within this stratified system, emphasizing how race and gender intersect to exacerbate their marginalization in educational spaces. Seen through this lens, public schools function as spaces where African-American males encounter compounded oppression, further entrenching their position within a racialized hierarchy (Bush & Bush, 2013). Thus, Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory critique the ways in which public schools sustain and reproduce systemic racial inequities.

This division reflects America's "deep-seated" desire to ensure societal stratification. These systemic issues make it difficult for African-American principals to implement policies and practices that effectively promote equity and inclusion. Furthermore, the lack of institutional support and cultural competence among colleagues and policymakers exacerbates these challenges (Khalifa et al., 2016). Despite these obstacles, African-American principals continue to strive for transformative change by leveraging community partnerships and developing culturally responsive leadership practices (Khalifa et al., 2016).

According to Robicheau & Krull (2016), African-American leaders frequently encounter overt, expected, and unfair racism in leadership roles. While candidates of color actively pursue advanced leadership opportunities, they often fail to secure them. Jackson (2006) has suggested that the reason they don't secure these positions is not a lack of qualified candidates but rather a systemic issue in which these candidates encounter barriers.

Furthermore, Jackson (2006) noted that African-American candidates are rarely considered for positions in non-minority districts, highlighting an additional layer of discrimination in hiring practices. Bompadre (2008) expanded on these points by asserting that African-Americans do not receive the recognition they deserve and often face closed doors. Even when they achieve leadership roles, they are frequently evaluated differently from their White counterparts. This discrepancy in career advancement suggests the persistence of a "White standard" against which leaders of color are measured, indicating that implicit biases continue to hinder their professional progress despite the absence of explicit barriers. Together, these authors illustrate the multifaceted nature of racial discrimination that many African-American principals, including African-American male principals, face in their pursuit of leadership positions.

Racial barriers "created emotional stress" (Robicheau & Krull, 2016, p. 31); "[were] both overt and covert" (p. 32); and "women of color felt they faced not only racial barriers but gender barriers as well" (p. 32). Racism toward African-American principals created a need for them "to prove their quality and readiness for advanced leadership work" (Robicheau & Krull, 2016, p. 32). Most African-American leaders "internalize the need to be extra prepared -- owning the notion that the organizations would not be ready for them as leaders" (p. 32), therefore anticipating the requirement to "over-prove their qualifications for the job" (p. 32). The racial and gender barriers faced by African-American principals, as described by Robicheau & Krull (2016), result in significant

emotional stress and the necessity for these principals to constantly prove their competence and readiness for leadership roles. This ongoing struggle reflects the internalization of the need to be exceptionally prepared, as these leaders anticipate having to demonstrate their worth and fight for their positions within organizations that may not be fully prepared to accept them.

African-American male principals encounter substantial challenges in developing and implementing policies aimed at addressing systemic inequities within their institutions. These challenges often stem from resistance at various levels, including from staff, district administrators, and broader community stakeholders. A common issue reported by African-American principals, as noted by Grubbs (2021), is the lack of socio-emotional learning support for students and staff, which presents a significant barrier to fostering inclusive educational environments. This issue is not unique to African-American principals; it is a challenge encountered by principals of all racial backgrounds. Leaders across the educational spectrum face similar obstacles in addressing systemic barriers and ensuring equitable support for students and staff.

Furthermore, this issue is exacerbated by limited resources, including financial, curricular, and human capital. In his research, Grubbs (2021) underscores the perspective of an African-American principal, Principal Persistent, who highlighted the difficulties of engaging students when curricula fail to reflect or resonate with their cultural backgrounds. This lack of a culturally responsive curriculum impedes students' ability to relate their experiences to their education, ultimately disengaging them from learning. Principal Persistent emphasized that educational practices must be inclusive and culturally reflective, as he faced persistent challenges in overcoming the status quo of outdated curricula that failed to address his students' cultural needs. This underscores the critical need for educational systems to evolve and provide resources that affirm and engage the diverse identities of all students.

As posited by Critical Race Theory, racism is a normal feature of society and is embedded in systems and institutions. The education system is not immune. Racist practices persist throughout the educational system, leading to the systematic exclusion of minorities from principalship roles despite their proven history of effective school management and significant representation in the teaching force (Wells, 1991). Ravitch (1984) identified several reasons why employers often choose not to hire minoritized candidates, including the desire to preserve the "status quo" despite the Brown decision and judicial interpretations of desegregation that allowed districts to do "whatever was necessary" to achieve "non-discriminatory" assignments. Additionally, the civil rights movement's call for hiring Black educators at the administrative level was often ignored, and a lack of equity was perpetuated by the belief that "Blacks were too far behind Whites and too far removed from the mainstream" (Ravitch, 1984, p. 27). Finally, those advocating for the rights afforded by Brown lost hope in the post-Brown principles of color blindness and became disillusioned with the fight for equality.

Upon securing leadership positions, African-American principals frequently encounter environments where pervasive racist attitudes and perceptions shape their experiences

(Wells, 1991). These leaders often face challenges such as microaggressions, racial bias, and heightened scrutiny regarding their leadership capabilities. These issues are embedded in broader systemic racism within educational institutions and other professional environments. As noted in the research, systemic racism continues to influence interactions, career progression, and the ability of Black leaders to operate without being subject to additional burdens associated with their race (Cacciatore, 2021; Hanlon, 2022). Such experiences are well-documented, illustrating how deeply entrenched racial biases affect leadership roles across sectors, including education. These biases hinder the professional advancement of African-American leaders and perpetuate inequality in leadership representation (Frueh, 2020).

Their treatment within these settings is often contingent upon how they are viewed through the lens of racial biases and stereotypes. A study of the perceptions of African-American administrators concerning the role of the African-American principal in Florida during the period 1973-1978 revealed that African-American principals and other administrators were equally frustrated with concerns from their supervisors, dealing with a lack of respect, trust, support, and origin of problems (Wells, 1991). Together, Wells (1991) and Ravitch (1984) illustrated how systemic racism has historically hindered the advancement of minority educators into leadership positions.

The challenges African-American principals face in leadership are not limited to overt forms of discrimination but are also deeply entrenched in subtle, often unspoken microaggressions. While systemic racism has historically obstructed the progress of minority educators, as noted by Wells (1991) and Ravitch (1984), the daily encounters with microaggressions further complicate their roles by undermining their leadership capacity. Furthermore, racism enacted as microaggressions can continuously erode the confidence that African-American education leaders must embrace to prove themselves. Solórzano (1998) supports this view by affirming that through the lens of Critical Race Theory, microaggressions are pervasive and often subtle forms of racism that undermine individuals' confidence and capacity for advancement, particularly for leaders of color. These racial slights, though sometimes hidden, contribute to ongoing frustration, self-doubt, and a continual struggle to gain the respect and trust they need to succeed in their positions (Sue et al., 2007; Robicheau & Krull, 2016).

Sue et al. (2007) defined microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). The constant and, at times, subtle snubs, insults, and derailments contribute to their routine feelings of personal disappointment (Robicheau & Krull, 2016). Leaders often describe microaggressions as frustrating and confusing experiences that contribute to self-doubt and second-guessing (Robicheau & Krull, 2016). As barriers, microaggressions are often the most insidious because of their initial lack of transparency (Robicheau & Krull, 2016). The lack of transparency makes it difficult for African-American principals to address and overcome the negative impact microaggressions have on the growth and self-esteem of those who experience them.

Supports

The research indicates that African-American male principals employ a multifaceted approach to developing and using tools to overcome barriers and challenges, particularly when implementing policies to mitigate systemic inequities in educational institutions. These principals exhibit a collaborative disposition, actively engaging with a spectrum of stakeholders representing diverse perspectives and interests. As highlighted in Wilkerson and Peck's (2022) research, the support of the African-American principal is often closely linked to community engagement. Once the principal actively participates in and connects with the community, this involvement becomes a key source of support. The principal's visibility and active presence in the community foster relationships that reinforce both professional and personal support systems, emphasizing the crucial role of community involvement in the success of African-American principals.

Khalifa (2012) highlights that when African-American principals participate in community activities, they cultivate a sense of solidarity and advocacy, reinforcing their leadership efforts and aligning with community needs. Further, Gooden (2005) emphasizes that this community engagement enables principals to establish themselves as role models, fostering deeper trust and support from the community, which bolsters their work toward achieving equity-centered educational goals.

In addition to fostering strong ties with their communities, African-American male principals frequently engage in statewide and national educator associations, playing a pivotal role in supporting the growth and success of their profession (Wilkerson & Peck, 2022). These principals often emphasize community involvement and collaboration more than their White counterparts, viewing such engagement as integral to their leadership and their schools' broader success (Wilkerson & Peck, 2022). This focus on community and professional networks enables African-American principals to build sustainable, supportive environments beyond the school walls.

Affinity groups serve as an essential source of support for African-American male principals by providing a space for shared experiences, mentorship, and collective problem-solving. These groups allow African-American male principals to connect with peers who face similar challenges related to systemic inequities, racial biases, and leadership isolation. In these supportive environments, participants can exchange strategies for navigating institutional barriers and fostering equity-centered leadership.

According to Wilkerson and Peck (2022), African-American male principals often turn to these groups for solidarity and guidance, particularly when they encounter resistance in their roles. Affinity groups offer professional development and a vital community of understanding, which is critical for their personal and professional well-being. This network of shared support helps African-American male principals persist and thrive despite the significant challenges they face in the educational landscape.

Background and Beliefs - A History of Care

African-American principals have a unique connection to the students they serve, particularly in identifying with their African-American students' experiences. This connection is exemplified by Lomotey's (1993) concept of the "ethno-humanist" principal, which posits that principals of color often closely identify with their students, sometimes seeing themselves in their students' lives (Wilkerson & Peck, 2022). This concept aligns with Lomotey's (1989) earlier identification of three essential qualities in African-American principals that are foundational to their work in addressing systemic inequities: a commitment "to the education of all students" (p. 85), confidence "in the ability of all students to do well" (p. 84), and compassion "for, and understanding of, all students and the communities in which they live" (p. 84). Moreover, Lomotey (1993) emphasized that these principals are not solely focused on students' academic progress from grade to grade; they are deeply concerned with their students' individual life chances.

African-American male principals exhibit a distinct approach to leadership that is deeply rooted in a specific care and commitment to the well-being and success of African-American students. Dillard (cited in Tillman, 2004) noted that supporting and safeguarding African-American children has historically involved interactions that are both caring and firm, shaped by clear ethical, social, and cultural norms and expectations. This leadership style is characterized by their unique understanding of these students' cultural and systemic challenges, allowing them to create equity-centered school environments that foster inclusion and academic achievement. This approach emphasizes a holistic view of student care, addressing academic needs and social and emotional development within the broader context of racial equity and justice. It underscores African-American male principals' profound connection and commitment to fostering equitable educational outcomes for their students. Their leadership is informed by professional responsibilities and personal and cultural experiences, which shape how they navigate systemic barriers and advocate for equitable educational practices within their schools.

African-American principals consider the cultural norms of the African American community in their leadership practices. The work of scholars such as Lomotey (1989, 1993), Dillard (1995), Walker (1993, 1996), and Bloom and Erlandson (2003) points to the importance of culture in the leadership of African-American principals. For example, Dillard wrote that principals have three cultural management roles: interpreting, representing, and authenticating school culture and relationships. Dillard (1995), citing the conclusions of Mitchell et al. (1987) in their work on the notion of cultural management, noted that Mitchell et al.'s conclusions were especially useful in showing that a principal's background, shaped by culture, religion, gender, and other identities, influences the distinctive, experience-based lens through which they understand schooling and enact leadership.

African-American male principals demonstrate a level of care that challenges stereotypes about African-American males. These leaders embody a care-based approach to school leadership, similar to that described by Bass (2019) in her Black

Masculine Caring (BMC) framework (Smith, 2021). This approach extends beyond the physical boundaries of the schools they lead, integrating their sensitivities, family relationships, aspirations, personal hopes and dreams, and community connections into their leadership identity and the ethos of their schools (Smith, 2021).

Smith (2021) highlighted that the African-American male principal is deeply attentive to the need for equitable outcomes for all his students, prioritizing and safeguarding high-quality, equitable education. Furthermore, this liberatory care-based approach to leadership underscores African-American male principals' commitment to justice and equity in education. By situating the care and leadership practices of African-American male principals within the context of BMC, Bass (2019) and Smith (2021) have provided a comprehensive understanding of the unique and transformative leadership style these principals embody.

Smith (2021) noted that culturally responsive school leaders focus on addressing systemic inequities and do so with care. According to Tillman (2004), the net positive outcome of this focus is evidenced by improved school climate and enhanced student achievement. A positive school climate is characterized by inclusivity, respect, and an increased sense of belonging. In illustrating the deep sense of care exhibited by African-American principals, Tillman provides an example of Mr. Dillard, a principal who demonstrated genuine concern and connection with his students: "He knew all the children by name. . . He loved people and he was concerned about you. And that's the kind of principal Mr. Dillard was" (Walker, 1996, p. 129). African-American male principals exhibit care and understanding, recognizing that the school environment often serves as a second home for Black students; it is an environment where they are taught, nurtured, supported, and corrected. As the central figure in the school, the principal provides vision, leadership, and guidance to students, teachers, and other staff members (Tillman, 2004).

African-American principals, particularly in historically underserved schools, often take on the additional role of advocates for racial equity and social justice, navigating systemic challenges and fostering culturally responsive environments (Tillman, 2004). These principals draw on their shared cultural experiences and deep understanding of the barriers faced by African-American students, shaping leadership practices that specifically address educational inequities and promote a sense of belonging for students of color. Unlike their counterparts, African-American principals often have to contend with community advocacy and institutional resistance, aligning their leadership with educational excellence and social justice.

This unique approach to leadership, characterized by resilience and purpose-driven advocacy, is closely tied to the concept of aggressive pessimism, which plays a crucial role in shaping the leadership style of many African-American principals. Aggressive pessimism is a leadership approach that enables leaders to acknowledge existing problems while actively working to implement solutions, drawing on their unique perspectives and experiences. It is particularly associated with African-American principals' approaches to addressing systemic challenges in educational contexts.

These leaders often face complex, deeply entrenched issues that require a clear understanding of the difficulties and a steadfast commitment to overcoming them.

The concept of aggressive pessimism is related to purposive leadership through Cornel West's notion of prophetic spirituality, which underpins the reimagining of educational leadership (Dantley, 2015). Purposive, principled, and pragmatic leadership are grounded in the components of West's prophetic spirituality, including "an aggressive or profound pessimism" (Dantley, 2015).

According to Dantley (2003), a purpose-driven leader is focused on helping the learning community navigate complex and volatile issues while maintaining a vision and hope that transcends these challenges. In conversation with this perspective, Bush and Bush (2018) highlighted the significant role of spirituality in the lives and decision-making processes of African-American male leaders. They found that these leaders attribute much of their success to their religious values, which align with their purpose-driven approach and provide a moral and ethical foundation for their leadership. Together, these authors underscored the interplay among purpose, spirituality, and leadership effectiveness among African-American male principals.

The beliefs and practices of African-American male principals are deeply rooted in their historical roles in their communities, extending far beyond the conventional duties of school administrators. Historically, African-American male principals have not only fulfilled the formal responsibilities of school leadership but have also taken on a multitude of informal roles that reflect their deep commitment to the social, familial, and educational well-being of their communities. As Rogers (1974) found, African-American principals have often served as counselors, legal advocates, community spokespersons, and political liaisons, addressing a wide range of issues from family disputes to youth legal challenges and from community advocacy to financial guidance. These extensive and multifaceted responsibilities underscore the unique position of African-American male principals as educational leaders and vital community pillars, shaping their leadership philosophies to be inherently connected to the care, advocacy, and support of their students and communities. This historical legacy continues to influence African-American male principals' beliefs and leadership practices, driving their commitment to equity and culturally responsive education (Rogers, 1974).

Critical Race Theory provides a valuable lens for understanding why African-American male principals often enact their leadership in the multifaceted ways described by Rogers (1974). Critical Race Theory emphasizes the centrality of race and racism in shaping the experiences of African-Americans, and it highlights how systemic inequalities permeate various aspects of life, including education. For African-American male principals, this means that their leadership is deeply informed by the recognition of their communities' historical and ongoing marginalization.

As Critical Race Theory underscores the importance of lived experiences and the role of counter-narratives in resisting oppression, African-American male principals are uniquely positioned to serve as counselors, advocates, and community liaisons because they understand, often through their own experiences, the challenges their students and

communities face. As noted in Rogers (1974), their leadership extends beyond academic matters to legal, financial, and emotional support, as they are acutely aware of the broader systemic barriers that affect their students' lives. Through a Critical Race Theory lens, it becomes clear that African-American male principals adopt these roles as a form of resistance to inequities, using their leadership to empower and uplift their communities while challenging the structures that perpetuate disadvantage.

The beliefs of African-American male principals, particularly their commitment to care, play a pivotal role in shaping the sociopolitical dynamics of their communities. As McKinney de Royston (2021) noted, African-American educators are driven by a profound sense of care and protection for African-American children, understanding the unique challenges these students face due to systemic racism and discrimination. This belief in care influences their relationships with students and their engagement with the broader community. African-American male principals act as advocates, navigating complex sociopolitical landscapes to create environments where their students feel valued and safe. Their commitment to care is thus inherently political, as it challenges structures of inequality and promotes equity, thereby impacting the power dynamics within their communities. By prioritizing care, African-American male principals reinforce their roles as community leaders deeply invested in Black students' educational success and social well-being.

As Rogers (1974) illustrated, these principals are instrumental in introducing and interpreting social and political trends within the African-American community, frequently taking on pivotal roles in local elections and advocating for school issues. Moreover, African-American principals often serve as critical liaisons between the African-American and White communities, effectively communicating and advocating concerns across racial divides. This extensive range of responsibilities highlights African-American principals' unique and multifaceted role as educational leaders and key community advocates, advisors, and supporters of their students' social and familial well-being.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) Practices

Having examined the barriers, challenges, and support systems that African-American male principals encounter, it is crucial to explore how these experiences inform and shape their leadership practices, particularly in their pursuit of equity-centered education. The struggles and systemic obstacles these leaders face underscore the importance of support networks and highlight the necessity of adopting Culturally Responsive School Leadership practices.

The existing literature lacks extensive empirical research on whether Culturally Responsive School Leadership has a beneficial or detrimental impact on school leaders who use its practices. While Culturally Responsive School Leadership is widely acknowledged as a framework aimed at improving inclusivity and equity in education, there is limited empirical evidence on how using these tools directly influences the

professional experiences or leadership efficacy of those who implement them. Additionally, there is a notable lack of studies that directly investigate the specific effects of Culturally Responsive School Leadership on African-American male principals, despite their prominent role in promoting culturally responsive practices in educational settings.

This gap in the research raises significant questions about how Culturally Responsive School Leadership specifically shapes the leadership styles, challenges, and successes of African-American male principals, particularly within the context of systemic barriers and cultural advocacy. Further investigation is necessary to understand the nuances of Culturally Responsive School Leadership's influence on these leaders.

In response to the challenges identified in the second domain, all principals, including African-American principals, can leverage Culturally Responsive School Leadership to create school environments that are inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the diverse communities they serve (Khalifa et al., 2016). This domain examines how these principals use the Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework to address and counter systemic inequities, creating educational environments where all students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, can thrive. This exploration bridges the gap between understanding the unique challenges faced by African-American male principals and the proactive strategies they employ to effect meaningful, sustainable change in their schools.

The Need for Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)

White children have consistently outperformed Black and Brown children on standardized academic tests since 1975. This reflects a 44-year trend, making the data predictable. Specifically, from 2011-2016, in both math and reading, the data reveal a steady and unchanged racial discrepancy between the achievement levels of White and Black students, where White students show results that are between 26% and 30% higher than those of Black students (National Assessment for Educational Progress, 2017). The need for racially and ethnically conscious principal leadership remains fundamental to improving student achievement in the nation's schools.

The research is clear and consistent: school principals are second only to teachers in their impact on student achievement (Louis et al., 2010). Grissom et al. (2021) and Leithwood et al. (2004) provide substantial support for the assertion that school principals significantly impact student achievement, second only to classroom teachers. Grissom et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive review of two decades of research, affirming that principals play a crucial role in shaping school climate, fostering teacher quality, and ultimately improving student outcomes. Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2004) emphasize that effective principal leadership is instrumental in influencing key school processes and fostering an environment conducive to high levels of student achievement. Both studies underscore the principal's pivotal role in student success, highlighting the impact of their leadership practices on academic outcomes. Culturally Responsive School Leadership argues that principal leadership that focuses on racial

equity as a commitment to social justice ensures equitable and optimal learning conditions for all children (Merchant & Garza, 2015). Equity-centered leadership encompasses diversity in race, gender, culture, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, power, and privilege (Guerra et al., 2013).

Culturally Responsive School Leadership requires leaders to share the responsibility for creating an equitable education system. It is a way of operating that builds on the relational aspect of education to improve the academic outcomes of minoritized students. Culturally Responsive School Leadership is designed to support all students. It requires leaders to be aware of their role in creating the system that has sustained the current outcomes of our minoritized community (Khalifa et al., 2016).

The Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework was introduced in 2016 by scholars Muhammad Khalifa, Mark Gooden, and James Earl Davis. It emerged in response to the growing recognition of the importance of implementing culturally responsive practices at both the classroom and school-wide levels, and of the pivotal role school leaders play in fostering them (Khalifa et al., 2016). This framework was developed following a comprehensive review of the literature on the specific behaviors of school leaders who aimed to enhance cultural responsiveness within educational institutions.

The Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework posits that equity-centered leadership critically examines how educational systems contribute to and perpetuate systemic inequities. Culturally Responsive School Leadership identifies four fundamental behavioral tenets essential for fostering equity in educational environments. The first fundamental behavior is developing critical consciousness, which requires leaders to understand the historical systems of oppression deeply enough to better address current inequities within their schools. Second, Culturally Responsive School Leadership emphasizes ensuring inclusive school environments by collaborating with those who have historically faced barriers to inclusion, thereby creating culturally affirming spaces for all. Third, it entails providing culturally responsive instructional leadership, in which leaders support teachers in reimagining curricula and pedagogy to honor the knowledge and contributions of people of color and to challenge inequitable educational systems. Lastly, Culturally Responsive School Leadership advocates for culturally responsive leadership engagement within community contexts, encouraging principals to establish equitable partnerships with the broader community, including parents, to redefine educational justice and share power in decision-making processes. These tenets collectively guide school leaders in creating equitable and inclusive educational experiences that reflect and respect their students' diverse cultural backgrounds (Gooden et al., 2023).

Grubbs (2021) asserts that African-American principals engage in culturally responsive instructional leadership by serving as instructional leaders within their schools. They use data-driven methods to analyze indicators such as academic performance, disciplinary actions, and attendance records. Their objective is to uncover and address any disparities within the student population. This analytical process is crucial for guiding the

development and implementation of policies to promote equity in academic achievement (Grubbs, 2021). As highlighted in Grubbs (2021), the strategic use of school data and cultural analysis is fundamental to fostering an equitable educational environment.

There were three schools when I started, there was the IB school, the Engineering School, and the School of Performing Arts. And then there was the rest of the school: that rest of the school equated to about 900 students. There are 1,300 students in the school; those 900 students seem to be getting what was left and no intentionally designed instructions for them. So we quickly went into putting some policies in place to ensure that AP and honors classes were achievable and accessible to African Americans by creating some policy changes and some intentional supports. (Grubbs, 2021, p. 101).

Viewed through the lens of Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory, the quote aligns closely with the systemic inequities and marginalization faced by African American students within educational institutions. Critical Race Theory emphasizes how race and racism are embedded in policies and practices, often leading to unequal access to resources and opportunities. In this case, the 900 students are relegated to subpar educational experiences compared with their peers in specialized programs such as the IB and Engineering. The principal's actions to create policies that ensure African-American students' access to Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes align with Critical Race Theory's call to challenge institutional racism and advocate for equity. Similarly, African-American Male Theory focuses on the unique experiences of African-American males as they navigate systemic barriers. The principal's intentional efforts to design supports and policies reflect a commitment to addressing these racial disparities and empowering marginalized students, particularly African-American males, to access higher academic opportunities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Gay (2010) posits that while culturally responsive teaching is critical for addressing the needs of minoritized students, it is insufficient on its own. She argues for the necessity of reforming and transforming broader educational systems, including policy, funding, and administration, all of which must also be culturally responsive to create equitable learning environments. Leadership reforms, which often focus on instructional, transformational, and transactional models, fail to adequately meet the cultural needs of minoritized students when intensified within the existing frameworks (Khalifa et al., 2016). Therefore, educational leaders must model culturally responsive practices, thereby establishing a school climate that reflects and supports students' diverse cultural identities. School administrators, like teachers, are responsible for shaping environments that prioritize equity and inclusivity in instruction and policy implementation (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2002) emphasized teachers' critical role in implementing culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy. Since the introduction of culturally relevant pedagogy by Ladson-Billings in 1995 and culturally responsive pedagogy by Gay in 2002, the focus on student learning and academic outcomes has shifted to how these approaches can reform education to improve the academic

outcomes of minoritized students. Both scholars have asserted that teachers are central to this process, as they are responsible for integrating these pedagogical principles into their teaching practices.

Culturally responsive school leaders ensure that the school environment is inclusive. Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2002) argued that educators must actively incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into their pedagogy. This approach enhances engagement and fosters a more inclusive and effective learning environment. Khalifa et al. (2016) supported this view by highlighting the importance of culturally responsive teaching and classroom management strategies that acknowledge and respect diverse cultural perspectives, as outlined by Weinstein et al. (2004). Culturally responsive instructional leaders support teachers in reimagining their pedagogy and curricula so that both honor the knowledge associated with people of color, thereby challenging systems that exacerbate inequities by ignoring, misrepresenting, or marginalizing different approaches (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist (2003) noted that teachers and teacher educators need to study alternative epistemologies, multiple perspectives, and critical multicultural pedagogies, including both-ways curricula, which would lead them to different ways of educating. They need to experiment with the difficult task of creating alternative curricula and pedagogical approaches that not only rock the boat but ultimately overturn the traditional curriculum grounded in the dominant culture of unexamined Whiteness.

The implementation of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy has the potential to enhance academic outcomes for students. By integrating students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into the curriculum and instructional practices, educators can create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment that resonates with diverse learners. This pedagogical approach acknowledges students' cultural identities and leverages them as assets in the learning process, thereby fostering improved educational achievement and equity (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2002). Further, Emdin (2016) argued that urban students' outcomes, including behavior, are subject to a teacher's understanding and ability to implement positive and engaging learning environments while connecting the teaching and learning to a student's culture.

Furthermore, instructional leadership practices must also reflect the principles of Culturally Responsive School Leadership. Education leaders must adopt strategies that support and sustain culturally responsive teaching, ensuring that all aspects of the educational environment are aligned with these tenets to effectively address systemic inequities and foster inclusivity (Khalifa et al., 2016).

In 2002, Gay acknowledged that culturally responsive teaching is not the sole factor in solving these challenges. The education industry is comprised of policies, funding, structures, management, and administrators who must engage in culturally responsive school leadership practices to transform all areas of the education enterprise. Unfortunately, these transformations have been inconsistent, nonexistent, and met with resistance. As Gay contended, if teachers are to be charged with the duty of assuring

that their pedagogy, classroom environments, and curriculum are culturally responsive and relevant, then, as instructional leaders, school administrators must be just as compelled to create a school culture and climate that reflect, embody, and support culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive leadership.

Culturally responsive school leaders are integral to improving the educational outcomes of minoritized students, and changes must occur at both the school and district levels. Culturally responsive efforts need to be school-wide and relevant to larger policy issues (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). A former Texas superintendent in the Brazosport Independent School District, Gerald Anderson, based a school reform model on the concept that school leaders are the primary source of school ineffectiveness. He adapted the model from the teachings of W. Edwards Deming, who pioneered the idea of Total Quality Management. According to Deming, it is business managers, not workers, who are responsible for the majority of product or service defects. Anderson applied the same principles to education. It is the administration, not the students, that is responsible for learning defects (Bray & Challinor, 2001).

As a culturally responsive school leader, the African-American male principal must be aware of his cultural background and biases. He must understand and value diversity and implement practices that cultivate and promote equitable student outcomes. Leaders must be able to administer federal, state, district, and school-based policies while critically analyzing how the ideologies, assumptions, political perspectives, and their own biases that underlie these policies impact their students, families, and learning (Horsford et al., 2011; Beachum, 2011).

African-American male leaders are uniquely positioned to enact Culturally Responsive School Leadership due to their inherent understanding of historical inequities and their tendency to value diversity. Khalifa et al. (2016) underscored the importance of the principal and the integral role of Culturally Responsive School Leadership in the effectiveness of a school site and district committed to improving academic outcomes for minoritized students.

Of all leadership expressions, the principal is most knowledgeable about resources, and he/she is best positioned to promote and support school-level reforms (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). The principalship is also the most recognizable leadership position in a school and the position most empowered by district and even state policy. It is also the one held most accountable for progress or lack thereof. Research suggests that unless promoted by the principal, implementation of cultural responsiveness can run the risk of being disjointed or short-lived in a school; and conversely, district-level mandates are only effective to the extent they are locally enforced. (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274)

Andrews and Grogan (2001) argued that aspiring leaders must understand their ethical and moral responsibility to build schools that advance and enact social justice. Sonya Horsford (2009) contended that improved instructional strategies, professional

development for teachers and administrators, and data-based decision-making are critical to improving educational results for low-performing students. She also contends that these efforts, absent an understanding of a student's personal background, culture, and community context, as well as gaps in expectations, resources, and opportunities, place an increasingly diverse nation of students at risk.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership requires leaders to tend to the community that they serve. Building strong relationships with students, families, and the community is a model for instructional leaders. These relationships lend themselves to building trust, cultivating respect, and understanding the cultural norms and values of the community leaders serve. People are diverse subjects with experiences that shape who they are. Tending to the community is an exhibition of care. If Black students perceive teachers generally care about them, a relationship of trust and cooperation can exist between the students and teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Schools are at the foundation of the community and are well-positioned to have the greatest impact on the broader community. Focusing on Culturally Responsive School Leadership requires leaders to tend to the school environment in its full context. Leaders tend to ignore this area when addressing students' cultural needs. As Khalifa et al. (2016) noted,

Unfortunately, most leadership reformers focus almost exclusively on instructional, transformational, and transactional leadership models to address the cultural needs of students. It has become increasingly clear, however, that an intensification of these same leadership strategies will do little to address the needs of minoritized students. (p. 1279)

These are the spaces in which African-American male principals who are culturally responsive leaders must be willing to develop the skills, vocabulary, and knowledge necessary to engage in discourse centered on equity and the social justice of an education system designed for all. Shields et al. (2002) acknowledged the necessity of creating space for this practice. The shift from a "community of sameness" to a "community of difference" highlights the importance of addressing complex social issues through respectful dialogue and ongoing awareness. For leaders focused on social justice and equity, it is crucial to develop the skills and knowledge needed to engage in meaningful discussions about diversity, to create safe environments for exploring differences, and to address cultural dissonance (Murtadha-Watts, 1999; Shields et al., 2002).

African-American male principals understand the importance of their interactions with the students they serve. This interaction is a crucial component of the success they experience in creating a positive school climate. Tillman noted that, when discussing African-American male principals, their goals and actions were consistent with interpersonal caring regarding the successful schooling of African American students (Walker, 1993). This interpersonal caring included providing students with psychological, sociological, and academic support (Walker, 1993). African-American male principals

lead schools with diverse populations, and it is imperative to practice leadership that meets the needs of students, teachers, and parents from all represented racial and ethnic groups (Tillman, 2004).

The African-American principals studied by Tillman (2004) believe that schools should be transformational institutions that provide students with various forms of support and that African-American students should be given opportunities for their total development. African-American male principals embody the idea that African-American students are not “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1995); they belong to their parents, the school, and the community. The interpersonal caring that African-American principals exhibit effectively creates school cultures that consider the needs of teachers, students, and parents and are conducive to promoting students’ success.

Black principal leaders rewrote history, redefined theory and practice, and rejected deficit theories about school leadership and the education of Black children. In the spirit in which Brown was intended, Black principal-leaders were transformers, translators, and cultivators. These individuals transformed education for Black children from a dream hoped for to a dream realized. They saw the possibilities for enhancing the life chances of Black students and transformed their schools into institutions that promoted Black student achievement, recognized Black culture, and promoted racial pride and self-esteem. (Tillman, 2004, p. 133)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review comprehensively examines the historical and contemporary challenges that African-American male principals face, as well as their unique strengths and leadership practices. The historical context, particularly the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision, has had lasting implications on the representation of African-American educators in leadership positions. The significant decline in African-American principals post-Brown, as highlighted by scholars such as Tillman (2004) and Fenwick (2022), underscores the systemic barriers that continue to impede African-American male principals' rise to leadership roles. These barriers, rooted in racism and institutional biases, create environments where African-American leaders often confront both overt discrimination and more insidious forms of microaggressions, as documented by Wells (1991), Ravitch (1984), and Sue et al. (2007).

The leadership practices of African-American male principals are profoundly shaped by their commitment to fostering equity and inclusion within schools, reflecting the foundational principles of both Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory. These leaders prioritize Culturally Responsive School Leadership as a means to address the systemic inequities that disproportionately affect marginalized students, particularly African-American students. Scholars like Khalifa et al. (2016) and Grubbs (2021) emphasize that Culturally Responsive School Leadership is about creating inclusive environments and ensuring that all students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, have equitable access to opportunities and resources. This

review highlights how African-American male principals use Culturally Responsive School Leadership to challenge entrenched institutional practices that perpetuate racial disparities, thereby fostering school climates that are culturally affirming and academically supportive.

Additionally, the review reveals the importance of community engagement and professional networks in supporting African-American male principals as they navigate the complexities of their leadership roles. The work of Wilkerson and Peck (2022) illustrates how these principals, through their commitment to their schools and communities, leverage relationships and networks to build sustainable support systems beyond the educational institution. This dual focus on leadership within and outside the school underscores African-American male principals' multifaceted roles as advocates for their students and their broader communities.

Lastly, this literature review affirms the critical role of African-American male principals in fostering equity-centered educational environments. Their leadership is informed by personal and professional experiences, shaped by a legacy of advocacy and resilience. Yet the persistent barriers they face highlight the need for continued research and systemic reforms to support their efforts to transform educational spaces for all students. Further inquiry is essential to explore how frameworks such as Critical Race Theory and African American Male Theory can continue to inform the leadership strategies of African-American male principals, ensuring that their contributions to equity and inclusion are fully recognized and supported.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview of Methodology

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach situated within an interpretivist tradition, with selective influences from phenomenological inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An ethnographic approach is especially well-suited to this inquiry because it allows for close examination of how leadership is constructed, interpreted, and enacted within cultural, organizational, and institutional contexts, while remaining attentive to participants racialized lived experiences and professional trajectories. Rather than reducing leadership to a set of decontextualized behaviors, this study treats it as historically, socially, culturally, and relationally situated meaning-making.

The study focuses on current African-American male principals in California. Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling to recruit leaders whose professional experiences and perspectives could illuminate the study's central questions. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured ethnographically informed interviews designed to elicit narratives about formative experiences, leadership practices, care, systemic barriers, supports, and enactments of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL). Opportunities for transcript review and follow-up communication were incorporated to strengthen credibility and interpretive depth.

Data analysis proceeded through iterative cycles of coding and interpretation, combining deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive codes were informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and African American Male Theory (AAMT), while inductive coding allowed unanticipated patterns to emerge from the data. The analytic process also drew on memo writing, constant comparison, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Collectively, these strategies were designed to generate contextually grounded interpretations of how African-American male principals understand and enact equity-centered leadership.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study rests on the need to better understand equity-centered leadership from the standpoint of leaders who often enact it amid racialized misrecognition, organizational constraint, and historical underrepresentation. Although prior scholarship has established the importance of school leadership, the persistence of educational inequity, and the promise of culturally responsive approaches, it has not sufficiently centered African-American male principals as knowledge holders whose experiences can deepen theory, challenge dominant assumptions, and inform practice.

This study makes four contributions. First, it contributes to educational leadership scholarship by centering a population too often marginalized, generalized, or rendered peripheral within the field. Second, it contributes conceptually by bringing CRT and AAMT into conversation, enabling leadership to be examined as racialized, gendered, relational, structural, and practice-based. Third, it contributes methodologically by

employing an ethnographic design that foregrounds participants' voices, narratives, and interpretive knowledge. Fourth, it contributes practically by offering insights that may inform principal preparation, district leadership development, mentoring structures, hiring practices, evaluation processes, and broader equity-centered school reform.

The significance of the study extends beyond the professional experiences of principals. Because school leadership shapes school climate, student belonging, instructional access, family relationships, and adult expectations, understanding how African-American male principals work to create equity-centered school environments has implications for students, families, teachers, districts, and communities alike.

Researcher Positionality and Role of the Researcher

In this study, I served as the primary research instrument. I designed the study, recruited participants, conducted interviews, analyzed data, interpreted findings, and reported the results. This role required methodological discipline, analytic rigor, and sustained reflexive awareness.

My relationship to the study is neither neutral nor distant. I am an African-American male principal and a product of public education whose lived and professional experiences shape my understanding of race, leadership, inequity, and schooling. This positionality strengthens the study by providing cultural familiarity, contextual sensitivity, relational credibility, and a fuller understanding of the meanings participants may attach to their experiences. At the same time, it requires deliberate reflexivity, because my commitments, experiences, and beliefs may influence what I notice, how I interpret narratives, and how I construct claims.

As an African-American male educator with more than 25 years of experience in public education, I bring both an insider perspective and a critical stance to this work. My leadership journey has been grounded in equity, cultural responsiveness, and an unwavering belief in the brilliance and potential of every child. I have worked in racially and socioeconomically diverse communities and have often confronted systems that marginalize students and leaders of color.

I do not approach this study as a neutral observer, but as a practitioner-scholar with a deep commitment to dismantling systems rooted in white supremacy and deficit thinking. Accordingly, I approached the research process with a commitment to transparency, rigor, and accountability. Rather than claiming neutrality, I understand knowledge in this study as co-constructed through interaction, interpretation, and analysis. Consistent with that stance, I engaged in reflexive practices such as journaling, memo writing, consultation with advisors and critical colleagues, and attention to disconfirming evidence to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participant narratives and analytic procedures rather than in assumptions alone. This position aligns with the interpretivist orientation and reflexive commitments that guide this dissertation.

Researcher Assumptions

Several assumptions inform this study. First, I assume that educational leadership is not race-neutral. School leadership is enacted within social, historical, and institutional contexts shaped by power, racialization, gender, and ideology. Understanding the experiences of African-American male principals, therefore, requires explicit attention to racism, racialized meaning-making, and the interaction of race and gender.

Second, I assume that participants lived experiences and narratives are legitimate and necessary sources of knowledge. This assumption aligns with interpretivist inquiry, CRT's emphasis on counter-storytelling, and AAMT's centering of Black male subjectivity. I begin from the premise that African-American male principals hold knowledge essential to understanding how equity-centered leadership is experienced and enacted.

Third, I assume that African-American male principals are not a monolithic group. Although shared patterns may emerge across cases, no single narrative can fully represent the experiences, beliefs, leadership styles, or political commitments of all African-American male principals. Variation across biography, school context, district conditions, and institutional history matters.

Fourth, I assume that care, barriers, and CRSL are best understood not as isolated topics, but as interrelated dimensions of leadership. In this study, culturally grounded care functions as an interpretive and moral orientation; systemic barriers constitute the terrain of the work; and CRSL represents the practical enactment of equity-centered leadership. This assumption is treated not as a predetermined conclusion, but as a conceptual proposition to be examined through the data.

Finally, I assume that my positionality may strengthen the study while also creating risk. My experience may allow me to perceive meanings that might otherwise be flattened or overlooked, but it may also incline me toward particular interpretations. Reflexivity is therefore not ancillary to the research process; it is integral to it.

Research Design

This qualitative study employs an ethnographic research design grounded in the interpretivist tradition, with selective influences from phenomenological inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethnography is especially well-suited to examining the complex, identity-informed leadership experiences of African-American male principals because it provides a lens for exploring how their personal, cultural, and professional identities are constructed, interpreted, and enacted within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Given the racialized and gendered landscapes of educational leadership, this approach allows for deeper examination of how systemic racism, patriarchal norms, and institutionalized whiteness shape and constrain leadership opportunities and practices (Bush & Bush, 2013; Khalifa et al., 2016).

This design is guided by the theoretical frameworks of African American Male Theory (AAMT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT), which center Black male subjectivity and provide analytic tools for examining racism, power, and resistance within schooling structures (Bush & Bush, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The study also draws from Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) to examine how participants translate critical consciousness into equity-centered action (Khalifa, 2018). In this sense, the design is explicitly political. It seeks not only to describe leadership experiences but also to interrogate systems of inequity by elevating the voices and leadership of those too often marginalized in both practice and scholarship.

Existing research has too often examined leadership through race-neutral lenses or without sufficient attention to how Black male identity shapes leadership practice, access to opportunity, and engagement with dominant power structures (Khalifa et al., 2016; Gooden & Dantley, 2012). African-American male principals are also frequently excluded from leadership discourses that reproduce deficit narratives or render them invisible in professional development and policy frameworks (Brown, 2005; Tillman, 2004). This study addresses those gaps by centering African-American male principals as knowledge holders, community leaders, and change agents committed to inclusive, equity-oriented school transformation.

More specifically, this study explores how African-American male principals navigate systemic barriers, exhibit care, and enact the principles of Culturally Responsive School Leadership to create equity-centered school environments. African-American male school leaders operate at the intersection of racialization, gendered expectations, and institutional exclusion, often simultaneously hyper-visible and marginalized within the broader PK–12 public education landscape (Bush & Bush, 2013; Gooden, 2012). AAMT and CRT provide frameworks for examining how these leaders make sense of leadership, resist oppressive structures, and foster school environments rooted in cultural responsiveness, care, and justice. These frameworks also support analysis of how racial and gender identities intersect with leadership philosophies and practices, how participants negotiate systemic constraints, and how they cultivate resilience and agency in the face of racialized adversity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Khalifa, 2018; Bush & Bush, 2013).

In alignment with the interpretivist tradition, this methodology privileges narrative, context, and participant voice. It seeks not only to document leadership experiences but also to honor them as counter-narratives to dominant ideologies of school leadership. The study's design reflects these commitments by prioritizing trust, reflexivity, and the co-construction of meaning throughout all phases of the research, from participant selection and data collection to analysis and dissemination. In this spirit, the inquiry is guided by the following primary research question: How do African-American male principals draw upon their personal backgrounds, racialized lived experiences, and core beliefs to enact equity-oriented leadership practices that demonstrate care, disrupt systemic racism and White supremacist ideologies, and cultivate culturally responsive, inclusive school environments?

Setting

This study is situated in California and includes current PK–12 principals working in racially and linguistically diverse school and district contexts. California provides an important setting for this inquiry because its educational landscape reflects demographic diversity, persistent inequities, and ongoing debates over policy and practice concerning race, access, belonging, and educational opportunity. These conditions make it an important context for examining how African-American male principals understand and enact equity-centered leadership across distinct organizational contexts while maintaining a common focus on serving diverse communities. To protect confidentiality, setting details are presented in ways that preserve participants' anonymity while still providing sufficient contextual grounding for interpretation.

Participants

The study involved seven current African-American male principals from California, selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inclusion criteria required that participants (a) self-identify as African-American males, (b) currently serve as PK–12 principals, and (c) have experience working in racially and linguistically diverse site and/or district contexts. Snowball sampling was especially appropriate for accessing this relatively small and underrepresented population and for leveraging professional affinity networks grounded in trust, shared identity, and relational credibility.

Within an ethnographic methodology, participant recruitment is not merely a procedural step; it is part of the broader process of entering a community, building rapport, and gaining access to culturally situated perspectives that might otherwise remain inaccessible. This sampling strategy aligns with the methodological and political commitments of ethnographic research by privileging depth, context, and insider knowledge over breadth alone, and by ensuring that participants were not only demographically aligned with the study but also meaningfully situated within the cultural and professional worlds under investigation. Inviting participants to refer colleagues who met the study's criteria supported a networked recruitment process that reflected the relational and community-based forms of support African-American male principals often rely on to navigate institutional barriers, while also strengthening the study's capacity to capture shared meanings, professional norms, and culturally grounded understandings of equity leadership (Gooden et al., 2018).

To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms and are described in aggregated rather than highly specific terms when necessary. This approach preserves the analytic value of contextual information while reducing the risk of identification.

3.1 - Participant Profiles

Participant	Pseudonym	Years as Principal	School level	Approx. students	School model	Standardized locale	Title I
P1	Malik Carter	7	High school	2,800+	Comprehensive (traditional)	Suburban	No
P2	Darius Bennett	7	High school (private school context)	400+	Private	Urban	N/A
P3	Andre Whitfield	10	Elementary (PK–6)	325+	Comprehensive (traditional)	Urban	Yes
P4	Terrence Holloway	10	High school	1,200+	Comprehensive (traditional)	Suburban	Yes
P5	Jordan Tate	5	Continuation/alternative high school (10–12)	100+	Continuation/Alternative	Suburban	No
P6	Raymond Knox	5	Elementary (PK–5)	~400	Comprehensive	Urban	Yes
P7	Marcus Ellison	3	Elementary (PK–6)	375+	Comprehensive	Urban	Yes

Malik Carter is a suburban high school principal with 7 years of principalship experience and 16 years in education. He identifies as an African-American male (age range: 40–49). serving a school of over 2,800 students. Malik described equity-centered leadership as a historically grounded obligation, emphasizing that unequal access to resources and opportunities often tracks with “zip code,” requiring leaders to ensure students receive what they need to thrive. He also traced his pathway into education to family influence (educators in the family), a formative move from a diverse community to a rural setting where he was the only Black student, and to a strong educator/coach mentor who modeled what it means to “pour into” students.

Darius Bennett is an urban principal in a private school context with 400-plus students. He has 7 years of experience as a principal and 12 years in education. He identifies as an African-American male (age range: 30–39). He cited his doctoral program as a key motivator for equity-centered leadership and described a long-standing vocational commitment to teaching that began in early childhood. Darius' leadership trajectory moved from elementary teaching to a vice-principal support role during administrative transitions, then to principalship when the school community asked him to step into the role; he later became principal at the high school he attended and currently serves in an administrative position.

Andre Whitfield is a principal in an urban district at a Title I PK-6 elementary school with 325 plus students. He has 10 years of principalship experience and 22 years in education. He identifies as an African American male (age range: 40–49). Andre described a leadership pathway that began with teacher-leader roles in an elementary/K–8 setting, multiple “taps on the shoulder,” district partnerships with higher education institutions, and peer encouragement. He emphasized sustained teacher leadership work (e.g., ILT, grade-level lead), exposure to principal hiring processes (serving on an interview panel), and incremental opportunities to lead when principals were out. Andre also underscored a cautionary lesson: he entered “straight into principalship” from the classroom and argued that he would not recommend this, “especially for a black leader,” because hard-site placement and weak support for new principals can make early principalship particularly precarious.

Terrence Holloway described a 36-year career arc across multiple districts and roles, beginning with a return to his own high school as a teacher and coach before moving into administration as Dean of Students and then assistant principal. He identifies as an African-American male (age 60 plus). He reported his first principal assignment in 1996, during a state takeover of the district, followed by a return to his previous district for approximately 5 to 6 years. He then described his leadership work in some of the state's largest and most diverse districts. He worked in site leadership and district leadership positions. Upon his return to the site principal position, he worked in what he described as a “hostile work environment” involving teachers, the state, and the district. This was the first time he experienced this type of environment. Family considerations took him across the country for several years, and upon his return to California, he worked with a university teacher preparation program with an eventual return to site leadership as a principal. He currently works as a principal at a Title I high school with a student population of over 1,200.

Jordan Tate reported being in his fifth year as principal at a non-traditional high school serving students in grades 10-12 with a student population of over 100. He identifies as an African-American male (age range: 40-49). Previously, he served for several years as a vice principal and spent a decade as an English teacher, coach, and restorative justice coordinator. He also described his mother as an educator. Jordan attributed his leadership commitments to returning to his alma mater and being “poured into” by veteran teachers during induction, including intensive work tied to California's high school exit exam era and extensive after-school/Saturday supports connected to

athletics as wraparound programming (rides, meals, and academic help for Black and Brown boys). He also described a formative moment as an honor graduate, one of “like three” Black boys, captured in an NAACP photo prominently displayed, which sharpened his awareness that many peers lacked structured access to college/career guidance; he framed his motivation as providing earlier coaching and making postsecondary/life pathways beyond his local community “tangible” and “accessible.”

Raymond Knox is currently in his fifth year serving as a principal with a total of 18 years in education; he identifies as an African-American male (age range: 30–39). He leads a Title I, urban, high-poverty, racially/linguistically diverse PK–5 school serving approximately 400 students. He reported site demographics as 45% Latino, 35% Black, and 20% Asian/White; 97% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch; 47% are multilingual; and 18% have IEPs, with an inclusion program and M/M noted. Raymond linked his equity-centered motivation to being a “struggling reader” and to lived experience across contexts, born and raised in the Midwest, where he later taught before moving to California. He described attending predominantly Black schools through eighth grade before being “bused out” into a private high school environment where he first experienced resource and achievement gaps and recognized his own reading/writing lag. He framed his principalship’s purpose as ensuring that all students, regardless of background or entry-level skill, leave elementary school prepared with the reading, writing, and math skills necessary for middle school, and as “changing the narrative of what’s possible” for students and the community.

Marcus Ellison is currently serving as principal of a Title I PK-6 elementary school with a student population of over 375. Student demographics are reported as 85% Hispanic, less than 1% African American, and the remainder “other”. He is in his third year in the role, with 25 years in education overall; he identifies as an African-American male (age range: 40–49). He stated his core motivation as “advocating for those who can’t advocate for themselves and being their voice,” and he framed principalship as expanding his reach from “25 students” to “375 students.” Marcus outlined a trajectory that began in 2010 as a long-term substitute teacher, followed by full-time teaching in a K–5. He reported completing a doctorate in 2021, serving as a vice principal at a TK–6 school, then as principal at a TK–2 school, and finally at a TK–6 school. He attributed his move into administration partly to observing “equitable gaps” (including Black students being pushed into special education), and he described post-COVID increases in gaps as reinforcing both the urgency and difficulty of equity-centered principalship.

Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured ethnographic interviews as its primary method of data collection. Within an ethnographic design, interviews served as a means of accessing participants’ interpretations of their professional worlds, the cultural meanings they attach to leadership, and the institutional conditions in which their practices are enacted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each interview was conducted individually and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, allowing participants adequate time to describe their

experiences, interpret their leadership contexts, and reflect on the social and organizational realities that shape their work.

The interview protocol was designed to elicit rich, contextually grounded accounts of participants' leadership practice within the cultural, racial, and institutional environments they navigate. Core areas of exploration included the role of racial and gender identity in shaping leadership practice and professional decision-making; participants' encounters with systemic racism, White supremacy culture, and gendered marginalization within educational systems; the ways they enacted equity-centered leadership in response to these conditions; moments of conflict, resistance, transformation, and care; and the professional, communal, and institutional networks that supported and sustained their work. These areas of inquiry were aligned with the study's research questions and theoretical frameworks and were intended to generate insight into the shared meanings, norms, and practices that characterize participants' leadership experiences (Maxwell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This data collection approach was informed by Maxwell's (2012) interactive model of qualitative research, which emphasizes coherence among research questions, conceptual framework, methods, and validity considerations, while also allowing flexibility in response to emerging insights. The semi-structured format provided a common set of guiding questions while also allowing the researcher to pursue unanticipated but analytically significant lines of inquiry that emerged during the interviews. This flexibility is consistent with ethnographic methodology, which values responsiveness to participants' perspectives and attention to the cultural and institutional contexts in which meaning is produced. In this way, the interviews functioned not simply as instruments for gathering individual accounts but as a means of examining how participants made sense of leadership within broader social, cultural, and organizational settings (Maxwell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In keeping with ethnographic methodology and qualitative best practice, data collection was also relational and iterative. Participants were allowed to review their interview transcripts and to engage in follow-up communication when clarification or elaboration was needed. These processes supported rapport, trust, and authenticity in the researcher-participant relationship and strengthened the credibility and interpretive accuracy of the findings through forms of member validation (Maxwell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Taken together, these procedures reflect an ethically and relationally attentive ethnographic design that foregrounds participant voice, situates leadership within culture and context, and seeks to produce trustworthy, contextually grounded interpretations of equity-centered leadership experience.

Data Analysis Procedure

All participant data were managed under strict confidentiality procedures that also constituted the initial stage of analytic preparation. Each participant was assigned a unique code and pseudonym, which replaced identifying information in transcripts, demographic questionnaires, and analytic memos (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Audio-

recorded interviews were stored on an encrypted, password-protected device, transcribed within approximately one month of data collection, and deleted at the conclusion of the study. The master key linking participant identities to codes was stored separately on a different, encrypted, password-protected device. Video features were disabled during virtual interviews to prevent the collection of identifiable visual data. Identifiable data were retained only for the period required by institutional and ethical guidelines, up to three years, and any de-identified data retained after that period were used only in ways consistent with IRB approval and participant consent (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interview data were analyzed through a systematic, iterative process consistent with ethnographic methodology and informed by the qualitative analytic procedures described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) and Creswell and Poth (2018). The analysis focused not only on what participants said, but also on how they made meaning of leadership within the racialized, cultural, and institutional contexts in which they worked. In this sense, the analytic aim was to identify recurring patterns, shared meanings, professional norms, and culturally grounded interpretations that shaped how African-American male principals understood and enacted equity-centered leadership. Consistent with Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) framework, the analytic process moved through four interrelated phases: data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. Qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA 2024) supported data management, coding, and the construction of analytic matrices and visual displays.

Following transcription, all data sources, including demographic and background information, semi-structured interview transcripts, and researcher analytic memos, were organized and read in full to support immersion in the data and to assess overall quality and completeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During this initial phase, I wrote preliminary memos to document early impressions, recurring language, emerging cultural and organizational patterns, and possible connections to the study's research questions and theoretical frameworks. This process supported ethnographic attention to context, meaning, and the social worlds participants described.

Next, I developed a coding process that combined deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive codes were informed by the study's conceptual frameworks, African American Male Theory (AAMT), Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), as well as by the research questions and relevant empirical literature (Miles et al., 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inductive codes emerged through close reading of the transcripts, allowing unexpected themes, participant meanings, and patterned ways of interpreting leadership to surface from the data. Initial coding emphasized descriptive, process, and in vivo coding to remain attentive to participants' language, locally constructed meanings, and the cultural logics embedded in their accounts. These initial codes were then refined into a provisional codebook that included code names, definitions, and examples (Miles et al., 2014).

The provisional codebook was systematically applied across the full dataset using a combination of hand coding and computer-assisted coding in MAXQDA. Throughout the process, constant comparison was used to examine similarities and differences within and across interviews, refine categories, and assess how individual accounts reflected broader social, cultural, and institutional patterns (Miles et al., 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Analytic memos were written regularly to document emerging interpretations related to race, identity, care, resistance, leadership practice, and systemic constraint. These memos also helped trace how participants described the norms, expectations, and power relations operating within their professional environments, a central focus of ethnographic analysis.

As coding progressed, related codes were grouped into broader categories and themes that reflected recurring patterns of meaning and practice across participants. Data displays, including matrices, concept maps, and thematic charts, were used to examine relationships among categories, compare participants' accounts, and explore how shared meanings intersected with AAMT, CRT, and CRSL (Miles et al., 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This phase of analysis was guided by an ethnographic concern with interpreting leadership as culturally and institutionally situated practice rather than as isolated individual behavior. Accordingly, the analysis sought to produce thick, contextually grounded interpretations of how participants navigated educational systems shaped by racism, exclusion, and competing institutional expectations.

To enhance credibility and dependability, at least one additional experienced qualitative researcher was invited to review the codebook and a subset of coded transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than treating this process as a narrow test of interrater reliability, it functioned as analyst triangulation. Differences in interpretation were discussed, and code definitions were clarified or revised as needed. This collaborative review strengthened the conceptual coherence of the coding scheme and helped ensure that interpretations remained well grounded in the data (Miles et al., 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Finally, conclusions were developed and verified through iterative movement between the raw data, codes, themes, memos, and theoretical frameworks. This process included revisiting transcripts to test emerging claims, searching for disconfirming evidence, and assessing whether interpretations were supported across participants and contexts (Miles et al., 2014). Consistent with ethnographic methodology, the final analysis aimed to illuminate how African-American male principals made sense of and enacted equity-centered leadership within particular cultural and institutional settings. The findings are therefore presented as contextually grounded interpretations of shared meaning, patterned experience, and socially situated leadership practice, allowing readers in similar settings to consider how the study's insights may resonate within their own contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The following three chapters, Chapters 4 through 6, present the empirical findings of this study, which explores how African-American male principals navigate systemic barriers as they work to create equity-centered and inclusive school environments.

Across these three chapters, the findings trace a coherent navigation story: multilevel barriers constitute the terrain that constrains and shapes how equity work is received and contested (Chapter 4); culturally grounded care provides an orientation and interpretive lens for day-to-day leadership (Chapter 5); and participants' enactment of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) represents the implementation moves through which they translate equity commitments into durable changes in belonging, instructional access, and community power-sharing (Chapter 6). Together, these chapters position African-American male principalship as embodied and racialized leadership work, simultaneously instructional, relational, political, and moral, carried out under conditions of heightened scrutiny and persistent misrecognition.

Chapter 4: Area 1 Findings (RQ1)

Problem Statement

The central problem addressed in this chapter is not simply that inequities persist, but that the field lacks a sufficiently detailed, practice-near understanding of the identity-informed sensemaking, leadership moves, constraints, and supports that shape African-American male principals' equity work, limiting the development of policies, professional learning, and organizational conditions that sustain and legitimize their leadership.

Traditional leadership models, often grounded in Eurocentric, race-neutral, and ahistorical frameworks, frequently fail to account for the distinctive pressures and possibilities associated with African-American male leadership, including heightened surveillance and the narrowing of Black men's professional identities to discipline management rather than to equity-centered instructional leadership (Khalifa, 2024).

As a result, scholarship has not sufficiently centered (a) how systemic barriers and racialized stereotypes function across interpersonal, organizational, and sociopolitical levels; (b) how culturally grounded conceptions of care, rooted in racial identity and lived experience, inform everyday leadership decisions; and (c) how African-American male principals interpret and enact culturally responsive school leadership in ways that produce durable improvements for historically marginalized students. This gap is consequential because African-American male principals are often positioned in the public imagination through narrow narratives, especially as symbols of order, rather than as leaders whose care, relational labor, and critical consciousness are central to school transformation (Smith, 2021).

Findings are organized around three interconnected areas of focus aligned with the study's research questions. Area 1 focuses on the systemic barriers, racialized stereotypes, and institutional dynamics participants encountered as they pursued equity-centered change.

This section also highlights the personal and professional supports, strategies, and protective factors participants identified as most essential to sustaining their leadership capacity, resilience, and long-term equity agenda. Area 2 examines how African-American male principals' culturally grounded conceptions of care, shaped by racial identity and lived experience, influence their sensemaking and day-to-day leadership practices, including relationship-building, instructional priorities, discipline approaches, and resource decisions.

This section also examines how participants assessed the benefits, tensions, and trade-offs of leading with care in systems that may constrain, misread, or politicize such leadership. Area 3 examines how participants interpreted, adapted, and enacted the domains of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) and how they calibrated implementation in local contexts, identified enabling and constraining conditions, and determined what counted as evidence of meaningful and durable improvement for

historically marginalized students. The four essential tenets of CRSL are Developing Critical Consciousness, Ensuring Inclusive School Environments, Providing Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership, and Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership Engagement in Community Contexts.

Across all three areas, the findings illuminate equity-centered leadership as both principled and pragmatic: pressured by racialized organizational realities, grounded in culturally informed care, and enacted through deliberate leadership moves aimed at belonging, instructional access, and systemic change. The chapters conclude with an integrative synthesis that links themes across the three areas and sets the stage for a discussion of implications for leadership preparation, district-level systems, and future research.

Barriers, stereotypes, institutional dynamics, and sustaining supports

This chapter presents findings from Area 1 that examine the hostile terrain African-American male principals must traverse as they pursue equity-centered leadership in racialized educational systems (Callender, 2020). Across participants, barriers were described as patterned conditions rather than isolated events, an “archival” continuity of racism operating through everyday interactions, institutional procedures, and sociopolitical pressures that shape what leaders can say, do, and sustain over time (Tafari & Wilson, 2022; Callender, 2020). While this terrain was most often described as constraining, Principal Knox noted that his local district context rhetorically values culturally grounded, relational leadership, “we value that a lot,” even as he still described racialized differences in how his decisions were received, underscoring that supportive equity discourse does not eliminate racialized interpretation.

Finding 1A: Interpersonal-level Barriers Centered on Surveillance, Credibility Discounting, and Racialized Role Expectations

At the interpersonal level, participants described a persistent sense that African-American male principals are scrutinized and pre-judged, often before full fact-finding occurs or before the student and family voice is centered. This pattern aligns with scholarship on the hyper-surveillance and hyper-visibility of African-American leadership in White-dominant educational contexts, where errors are magnified, and professional critiques may be recast as attitudinal or psychological concerns (Callender, 2020). Principal Holloway summarized the embodied clarity with which participants described recognizing racialized dynamics, and the expectation that such recognition is experiential rather than theoretical:

You have to understand; we see equity in a different way because we've experienced it or the lack thereof all our life. With racism, I can see it, feel it, smell it a mile away. You have to live it, to lead it.

Participants also described how “buzz” operates as an informal adult complaint structure that can outpace due process and foreclose empathy. Principal Holloway

stated that when teacher buzz is high, “the system will crucify you before hearing the student, the family, or me,” naming a recurring pattern in which institutional response privileges adult narratives over African-American family voice.

In parallel, Principal Ellison described credibility discounting through mundane but consequential behaviors, lack of response to emails, needing others to speak on his behalf, and linked these experiences to racialized perceptions of African-American male leaders as “confrontational” or “overbearing.” Principal Carter echoed this anticipatory judgment in explicitly comparative terms, noting that race and gender altered how both he and his decisions were read: “I definitely know if I were a white man principal in my context, everything I do would be less scrutinized and received with positive intent,” and he linked this to the kinds of disrespect and resistance others felt permitted to display toward him. “People I’ve hired as part of my team with no experience felt emboldened to tell me what they weren’t going to do even though it was their job.”

He further illuminated the disrespect by referencing the aspects of racial battle fatigue that took place during such encounters, “I had to step back and determine if this was just their character or how they viewed me as a black male leader. I quickly found out that it was the latter.” Taken together, these narratives suggest that interpersonal barriers often function through anticipatory judgment: leaders must manage others’ interpretations of them before they can even address the substantive equity issue at hand.

Table 4.1 synthesizes participants’ descriptions of common interpersonal barriers and their impacts on leadership capacity, drawing on both interview data and the supporting literature.

Table 4.1. Interpersonal barriers and their impacts on leadership capacity

Interpersonal barrier	Mechanism of action	Impact on leadership capacity
Microaggressions	Constant questioning of credentials, competence, or “fit.”	Erodes confidence and requires ongoing “energy tax” to navigate (Hotchkins, 2016).
The “Angry” trope	Professional advocacy or firmness is labeled as “aggressive” or “threatening.”	Mutes voice and constrains equity push, particularly when change is framed as conflict (Callender, 2020).

Othering	Treatment as an outsider or a token rather than a professional peer.	Produces institutional isolation and limits authentic collaboration (Callender, 2020).
Hyper-visibility	Disproportionate scrutiny of decisions and behavioral nuances.	Increases fear of failure and reduces willingness to take pedagogical or political risks (Callender, 2020).

Finding 1B: Organizational-level barriers

At the organizational level, participants described barriers embedded in role expectations, onboarding practices, and adult protection systems (e.g., union escalation, HR routines, and decision-making constraints). Consistent with research on the “invisible tax,” participants noted that African-American male principals are often positioned as ideal disciplinarians and disproportionately assigned to high-need contexts, which can narrow their perceived value to controlling behavior rather than advancing instruction, curriculum, and equity outcomes (McGuire, 2024). These expectations intersect with what Pabon (2016) describes as the “Black Superman” paradox: leaders are presumed to be uniquely capable of absorbing crisis conditions while simultaneously being under-supported, creating conditions for burnout and early departure.

Participants’ accounts emphasized that discipline, particularly adult pushback against it, became a frequent source of organizational friction. As Principal Carter stated, “I think the adult pushback when it comes to discipline specifically, is one of the biggest challenges.” Principal Ellison described teacher escalation to the union/HR “without coming to me first,” and he relied on supervisor coaching to navigate what he framed as a known pattern of disruption. Similarly, Principal Tate described having to repeatedly anchor discipline decisions in legal and policy clarity when adult systems challenged him.

I've been fighting that since day one. They'll say, 'Well, I talked to my union rep about our discipline practices and how I don't feel safe.' And I say, 'Here's the Ed Code that governs our decision. It is a constant battle.

Principal Whitfield’s narrative further illuminated structural vulnerability for novice principals, particularly African-American leaders. He described entering “straight into principalship”. He stated he would not recommend it “especially for a black leader,” because new principals are often assigned to demanding sites while support is “very lacking.” Principal Knox, a PK–5 principal in an urban, high-poverty, racially/linguistically diverse context, similarly described organizational constraint as a combination of labor systems, staffing instability, and role overload. He located barriers in being “a very unionized district,” having to reset expectations amid staff resistance, and needing to enact “progressive discipline” when adults did not “do the thing that needs to be done.”

He also tied organizational strain to structural understaffing and the intensified demands of turnaround work: “My school has a very complex program. I don’t have an assistant principal, and I am responsible for it all,” and he described the loneliness and load of being the final decision-maker while managing day-to-day operations in that context, “I am always on. I don’t get to sit back and observe because I am always leading or in the middle of it. It’s a grind to stay on level, let alone elevate.” Across these accounts, organizational barriers did not simply create inconvenience; they functioned as constraint architecture, procedural and political systems that can redirect, delay, or dilute equity-centered action.

Finding 1C: Sociopolitical Pressures

Participants described equity leadership as public work, shaped by community narratives, political discourse, and reputational vulnerability. These pressures required principals to buffer their schools from external demands while navigating district mandates that are often framed as race-neutral and metric-driven, even when local community needs are oriented toward justice and humanization (Khalifa, 2024). Participants’ descriptions also align with the literature, which notes that zero-tolerance approaches and hegemonic curriculum frameworks can function as sociopolitical barriers to equity agendas, requiring principals to exercise political discernment and strategic communication. Principal Ellison framed sociopolitical commitment through a service orientation to community: “For me, I wanted to serve my community. You know, that looks like me. That way, I knew that I would have to stay equity focused, and they have to figure out where they stand.”

Participants also described how quickly accusations or controversy can circulate through community networks. Principal Holloway described routine exposure to accusations (e.g., “call me a racist”) and emphasized that responses must be managed carefully because a single misstep can trigger public circulation and intensify conflict. Principal Tate described classroom-level political talk and what he called the “butchering” of African-American social leaders by some staff, prompting him to use walkthrough presence as an accountability lever. Across cases, sociopolitical pressure was not episodic; it was a standing condition that shaped leaders’ risk calculations, messaging, and timing.

Finding 1D: Sustaining Supports

Participants consistently described sustaining supports as protective infrastructure rather than optional self-care. In their accounts, supports served dual functions: (a) emotional protection against isolation and chronic stress, and (b) strategic capacity for navigating conflict, reading institutional dynamics, and maintaining a long-term equity agenda. These supports were often located outside formal district structures, forming what participants described as resilience pipelines and identity-affirming professional ecosystems. Principal Carter emphasized the sustaining power of connections with leaders who share similar lived experiences: “I think making those connections with

folks that have similar experiences has been really critical to sustain myself as a leader, as a person.” Principal Holloway described an affinity-based professional learning space as a recurring resource for navigating conflicts and institutional dilemmas:

The affinity group within (de-identified) has been my safe place. So, every month I’m able to discuss situations and concerns and conflicts within the system, and just kind of get support, advice, a listening ear, on how to navigate it and how to get support around it.

Principal Bennett highlighted the stabilizing function of a trusted partner in the work: “My wife is a huge thought partner when it comes to this work. She knows the work and is always honest and supportive at the same time.” Principal Knox added a parallel account of support as both identity-affirming and practically sustaining. He described drawing on an internal leadership team for some decisions while reserving “touchy” matters for trusted external networks, and he identified an affinity-based pipeline as especially sustaining: “I’m in the National Fellowship of the black and Latino male educators...they’ve been really supportive.” He paired this with an explicit emphasis on self-preservation as a leadership competence: “strategies that I use for self-care and self-preservation daily to keep my mind right, so that way I can lead more effectively,” reinforcing the finding that supports the view that self-preservation functions as protective infrastructure for long-term equity work, not optional wellness add-ons. Across these accounts, supports were not generic; they were deliberately selected and identity-affirming, designed to protect leaders from misrecognition while strengthening their ability to sustain equity work over time.

Table 4.2. Sustaining supports and their functions in equity-centered leadership

Support type	Specific strategy or source	Function in sustaining leadership
Mentorship	Formal and informal networks of other Black male administrators	Safe space for counsel, validation, strategy, and professional affirmation (McGuire, 2024).
Spiritual faith	Church communities; personal prayer/meditation	Reinforces purpose/calling and buffers institutional stress (Dantley, 2003).
Family systems	Support from spouses, parents, and children	Source of stability, unconditional support, and grounding amid conflict.

Coping strategies	Silence, behavioral vacillation, strategic selective engagement	Preserves emotional energy; enables leaders to “pick battles” under constraint (Callender, 2020).
Professional development	Anti-bias training; culturally responsive leadership cohorts	Provides tools and vocabulary for identifying and challenging systemic bias (McGuire, 2024).

Summary

The findings in Area 1 corroborate and extend the scholarship of Callender (2020) and Tafari and Wilson (2022) by documenting a multilevel "barrier ecology" where systemic racism operates through archival continuity rather than isolated incidents. At the interpersonal level, participants' descriptions of hyper-surveillance and credibility discounting directly align with Critical Race Theory's (CRT) assertion that racism is an ingrained aspect of institutional life. Specifically, the sense of being "scrutinized and pre-judged" matches Johnson's (2006) research on how African-American male leaders are often filtered through societal fears of Black masculinity, leading to their professional firmness being misread as "aggressive" or "intimidating".

Organizationally, the findings reinforce the "invisible tax" and the "Black Superman" paradox described by King (2016) and Pabon (2016), where participants were pigeonholed into roles as disciplinarians or "crisis responders". This extends the literature by highlighting how "adult protection systems," such as union escalation and HR routines, function as a "constraint architecture" that delays equity-centered action. Furthermore, the sustaining supports identified by participants, mentorship, affinity spaces, and identity-affirming networks, corroborate Wilkerson and Peck (2022) and McGuire (2024), who argue that such networks are "protective infrastructure" essential for resisting institutional isolation and racial battle fatigue.

Chapter 5: Area 2 Findings (RQ2)

Care, identity, and day-to-day leadership practice

Across cases, participants described care as a culturally grounded, equity-centered stance that shaped how they interpreted student needs, responded to conflict, and allocated attention and resources. Rather than framing care as sentimentality, participants consistently positioned care as humanization and belonging enacted through practice, a leadership orientation that protects dignity, expands inclusion, and resists deficit interpretations of students who have historically been marginalized (Smith, 2021; Bass, 2019). In this study, care functioned as both (a) a sensemaking framework (how principals interpret behavior, conflict, and need) and (b) a practice framework (how principals respond through routines, advocacy, and institutional navigation).

Finding 2A: Care Defined

Participants defined care primarily through students' felt experience of inclusion, visibility, and dignity. This definition aligns with scholarship describing an ethic of care among African-American male leaders as action-oriented and liberatory, anchored in cultural identity and lived experience, and oriented toward dismantling inequitable institutional patterns (Smith, 2021; Bass, 2019). Principal Bennett articulated care as belonging and recognition: "When I think of care, I think of a student being included, a student feeling like they belong. And more importantly than anything else, when it comes to educating our students, I think it's a student who feels seen." Principal Knox extended this definition by explicitly rejecting "care" as interpersonal likability and instead linking it to relational responsibility and high expectations, an equity stance that combines affirmation with accountability:

"Making sure that kids and staff know that care isn't just about liking you, or me thinking you're a cool person. The bar is high, and I love you, so I'm going to hold you accountable for meeting the bar too."

Other participants framed care in explicitly equity-responsive terms. Principal Holloway described care as "making sure everybody gets what they need," emphasizing differentiated responsiveness rather than equal treatment. Principal Carter described care as "caring for the whole person" and emphasized his desire to make care "transformational." Taken together, participants treated care less as a "soft" add-on and more as a leadership lens shaping decisions about discipline, instruction, and resource allocation, especially for students most vulnerable to exclusion.

Finding 2B: Care translated into relationship-centered leadership routines

Participants linked their care-based leadership to their lived experiences as Black boys and men navigating schooling systems that often interpret Black youth through deficit logics. Their leadership sensemaking reflected bicultural fluency, understanding institutional expectations while remaining attuned to students' cultural realities and to how school routines can reproduce inequity (Smith, 2021). In day-to-day practice, this surfaced through relationship-centered leadership routines that converted equity from a stated value into actionable work.

Principal Tate provided a thick description of how relationship-based care reshaped the meaning-making of discipline. In parent conferences with students initially framed as "behavior" problems, Principal Tate described connecting student conduct to trauma exposure, limited counseling access, and home instability, prompting a whole-child response rather than punitive escalation. Principal Tate also described an explicitly racialized dynamic in which some teachers attributed student compliance to his stature and Black male presence. He resisted that framing and clarified that his authority was grounded in relational trust, professional presence, and context-informed judgment, not fear-based compliance. In this way, care shaped both interpretation (what behavior "means") and response (conferencing, access to counseling, and differentiated

supports). “I think it starts with relationships. Really, knowing the students.”

Principal Knox similarly emphasized that care becomes real through repeatable routines that communicate affirmation and capability. He described a daily whole-school practice in which students collectively rehearse identity-affirming statements as a normalized feature of the school day: “Every morning, we don’t go straight to class. We do a morning meeting with the whole school. We make kids repeat the words, I am loved, I am respected, I’m affirmed, I’m excellent.” Here, care is enacted not as individualized sentiment, but as a schoolwide practice designed to shape students’ sense of belonging and competence.

Finding 2C: Care-informed resource decisions and advocacy moves

Care became most visible when participants described advocating for supports amid staff pushback or institutional inertia. These narratives illustrated care not merely as interpersonal commitment, but as a resource strategy and institutional negotiation. Principal Holloway described a case in which teachers pushed for an alternative placement soon after a student qualified for special education. Principal Holloway resisted deficit framing, remained aligned with the students’ needs and family partnership, and absorbed union pushback because he prioritized what he understood to be the students’ right to appropriate support and belonging. Principal Ellison similarly described pursuing an on-campus wellness center complete with staff and navigating district “loopholes” by leveraging budget partnerships and alternative funding routes to secure resources that would otherwise be difficult to access through standard channels. Principal Knox provided a parallel example of care as institutional design, creating a coherent, schoolwide system for recognition and affirmation because he perceived a gap in how students were being seen and celebrated. In his first year, he introduced a monthly structure to operationalize collective belonging and reinforce shared values:

There was no schoolwide system to recognize and affirm students around a set of values. We created our four school values: perseverance, integrity, responsibility, and respect. We give tickets to acknowledge them. To show that we care. This is a great tool to affirm students and exhibit care.

Across these accounts, care-based advocacy served as an equity move that redistributed support to students, often requiring principals to accept interpersonal conflict, reputational “buzz,” or heightened scrutiny as the cost of protecting students’ access and dignity.

Finding 2D: Leading with care produced predictable tensions

Participants consistently described the tension of leading with culturally grounded care inside systems where Black masculinity is frequently filtered through racialized expectations. Several participants emphasized the need to calibrate emotional expression and interpersonal posture to avoid being interpreted through the “angry Black man” trope. Principal Tate described the daily pressure of surveillance and

misinterpretation, including the risk that a single moment could be publicly amplified (e.g., through PTA/community social media), making self-regulation a protective strategy rather than a personal preference. Principal Ellison described both microaggressions (including being addressed in ways that diminished his earned professional status) and his strategic use of allies to prevent advocacy from being recast as aggression:

The microaggressions are just, they're real. So, I just tend to fall back, observe, and use and leverage my white allies or others to advocate for me. So that way, it's not me coming off as the angry black man.

Principal Holloway described the interpersonal work of ensuring one's leadership is received as collaborative in a profession shaped by race and gendered norms: "I try to do my best to be as collaborative as I can. Especially in the profession that we're in, predominantly female, white." Principal Knox both complicated and reinforced this pattern. On one hand, he noted that context matters: in his district, he experiences relational leadership as culturally valued, sometimes to the point that he worries competence and academic progress can be underweighted, a "reverse issue" that reframes the care and accountability balance as a local tradeoff rather than a universal constraint: "In my district we value that a lot, and I think we almost overvalue that too much, and don't value competence, academic achievement."

On the other hand, he still named racialized reception and differential interpretation of decisions, indicating that even when care is culturally legible in a given context, Black male leadership remains vulnerable to credibility distortion and disrespect: "If I were a white man, I'd be viewed differently. My decisions would be viewed differently. Some of the disrespectful actions or words, they might not use with somebody else."

These narratives align with scholarship suggesting that Black masculine care, including "rough love" and fatherly guidance, can be misread as aggression or unprofessionalism within Eurocentric norms of leadership and "professionalism," prompting leaders to engage in "masking" as an adaptive strategy (Bass, 2019). Participants' descriptions indicate that care-based leadership is both beneficial and costly: it can deepen students' sense of belonging and relational trust, while simultaneously requiring additional interpretive and emotional labor to manage misrecognition and surveillance. Participants generally assessed that the benefits of leading with care outweighed the strain when adequate external supports and protective professional relationships were present (Gooden et al., 2023).

Summary

The findings regarding culturally grounded care provide a powerful corroboration of Bass's (2019) Black Masculine Caring (BMC) framework and Lomotey's (1993) concept of the "ethno-humanist" principal. Participants defined care not as sentimentality, but as humanization and belonging, a stance that aligns with Tillman's (2004) documentation of Black principals who historically identified closely with their students' life chances. For

example, the use of relationship-centered routines to reshape discipline refutes deficit-based models by situating student behavior within sociopolitical and trauma-informed contexts rather than attributing it to inherent flaws.

However, the findings also extend the literature on the "costs of caring." Leading with care in a racially stratified system produced predictable tensions, such as the need for "masking" to avoid the "angry Black man" trope, which supports the findings of Smith et al. (2020) regarding racial battle fatigue. Participants' experiences suggest that while care is a form of resistance to White supremacist ideologies, as posited by CRT, it also subjects the leader to heightened surveillance, requiring strategic alliance-building to maintain legitimacy.

Furthermore, care functioned as a culturally grounded equity stance that influenced leadership sensemaking, daily practice by (a) defining equity through belonging and being "seen," (b) operationalizing relationships as the mechanism for discipline and conflict response, and (c) driving advocacy and resource decisions in ways that protected historically marginalized students.

Building from this care-as-navigation frame, Chapter 6 examines how participants enacted CRSL as praxis, how they translated critical consciousness, inclusive climate work, instructional leadership, and community engagement into local implementation moves, and how they used mixed evidence to judge whether those moves were producing meaningful and durable improvements for historically marginalized students.

Chapter 6: Area 3 Findings (RQ3)

Enacting Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)

Chapters 4 and 5 together demonstrate that equity-centered leadership among African-American male principals is both structurally constrained and relationally grounded. Chapter 6 focuses on what participants did within, and sometimes against, those constraints: how they interpreted and enacted the domains of CRSL in ways that advance belonging, instructional access, and community voice, while remaining attentive to the risks and tradeoffs identified in the prior chapters.

Area 3 examines how participants translated the tenets of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) into local practice. Across cases, CRSL was not described as a discrete program or checklist; it emerged as praxis, an ongoing process of interpretation, adaptation, and calibration in response to the lived experiences of students and families and the institutional constraints described in Area 1. Participants' enactment of CRSL emphasized (a) naming inequity explicitly, (b) building belonging through identity-affirming structures and adult practice shifts, (c) ensuring instructional access and representation, and (d) creating community engagement arrangements that move from involvement to power-sharing. Principal Knox reinforced this praxis orientation by noting that he was doing much of this work before he had language for it: "I enacted these tenets quite often but wasn't aware of them. I had not given each tenet a particular framework to place my actions under." Participants assessed impact using mixed evidence, formal metrics (e.g., attendance patterns, discipline data, benchmark assessments), and "lived indicators" (e.g., student trust, shifts in adult discourse, parent agency).

CRSL Tenet 1: Developing critical consciousness

Finding 3A: Critical consciousness functioned as "pattern recognition", explicit naming of inequity, and adult-facing disruption

Participants described critical consciousness as an ability to recognize inequity quickly, name it precisely, and move adults into reflective discomfort rather than allowing race-neutral language to obscure patterned harm. In this sense, critical consciousness was not framed as an abstract awareness, but as an analytic stance developed through persistent exposure to racialized schooling conditions and an "interrogation" of the system they lead. Principal Holloway captured this as embodied knowledge, an experiential capacity to identify racism without requiring additional proof of its legitimacy: "I don't have to read a book or do research to know what racism is. I live it and navigate it daily. It is what it is."

In thick description, Principal Holloway described addressing injustice "head on," including naming Black boys explicitly rather than relying on diffuse "opportunity gap" language that can minimize urgency or diffuse responsibility. This move, shifting from euphemism to specificity, served both diagnostic clarity and a moral stance: it required

adults to confront who is harmed, how harm is produced, and what institutional routines normalize it. Principal Knox narrated a parallel form of adult-facing disruption in day-to-day problem-solving: he described intentionally reframing adult interpretations of student conduct by making institutional explanations explicit and by interrupting deficit-meaning-making. As he explained, his common move is “really to explain to the adults involved” how what they observed is connected to student need, because “that’s an important piece of disrupting deficit narratives.” Consistent with CRSL literature, participants described implementation moves such as equity audits of school policies, staff critical reflection on bias, and challenging ahistorical curricular narratives that obscure racialized power. Participants described evidence of success as changes in adult discourse, increased staff awareness of systemic inequities, and formal shifts in mission/vision language toward anti-oppressive commitments.

CRSL Tenet 2: Ensuring inclusive school environments

Finding 3B: An inclusive climate was built through belonging systems, student voice, identity-affirming spaces, and adult practice shifts that reduce harm

Participants framed inclusive climate as more than “safety and comfort.” They emphasized systems and structures that help students feel protected, visible, and affirmed, particularly within schools that can operate as sites of racial trauma for students of color. In participants’ accounts, climate work was assessed through daily student experiences (e.g., visibility, trusted adults, responsiveness) and the coherence of adult practices. A core climate outcome was belonging and being seen. One leader, Principal Whitfield, articulated this plainly: “When I think of care, I think of a student being included. A student who feels seen.”

Principal Knox’s description of climate work further clarified belonging as an intentionally designed daily routine rather than an abstract value. As previously mentioned, he described a whole-school morning meeting in which students repeatedly hear and speak affirming messages about dignity and capability: “Every morning, we don’t go straight to class. We do a morning meeting with the whole school. We make kids repeat the words, I am loved, I am respected, I’m affirmed, I’m excellent.” As this practice was previously referenced, it is not only indicative of climate work but also of care. Participants also described belonging systems that included identity-affirming student spaces and culturally enriching opportunities. Principal Carter described recognizing an institutional absence (no Black student union) and responding by creating a structure that was both unifying and culturally sustaining: “It came to my attention that we didn’t have a Black student union. I wanted to do more than simply unify our black students on campus. I wanted to also provide them something culturally enriching.”

In thick description, Principal Knox described building schoolwide coherence through a structured recognition system anchored in shared values. He explained that although individual classrooms affirmed students, “there was no schoolwide system to recognize and affirm students,” so he led the creation of school values and monthly town hall

meetings where students and staff are recognized for living those values, “to show that care,” and address a gap in how students were being affirmed. Principal Tate described building shared adult practice around consistent check-ins and collective responsibility, “Help adults help kids,” so students experience a coherent support environment rather than fragmented responses. Principal Holloway described climate as partly measurable through how students and adults experience the campus and whether students can identify trusted adults to go to when harm occurs. These narratives align with CRSL scholarship that emphasizes inclusive environments through restorative practices, culturally affirming spaces, and the disruption of deficit-oriented orientations that drive exclusionary discipline. Participants identified evidence of improvement through patterns in climate surveys, reduced suspension rates, and increased student voice and agency in governance.

CRSL Tenet 3: Providing culturally responsive instructional leadership

Finding 3C: Instructional leadership was framed as equitable access, culturally sustaining content, and aligned adult learning

Participants described culturally responsive instructional leadership as ensuring both (a) access to rigorous pathways and (b) representation in what and how students learn. CRSL-informed instructional leadership, in participants’ accounts, required coherence: aligning professional development, curriculum review, and shared expectations, so culturally relevant pedagogy becomes sustained practice rather than individual teacher preference. Principal Bennett framed instructional leadership as ensuring that decision-making is grounded in research and evidence: “I’m going to make sure that you have research, I’m going to make sure you have data so you can make a data-informed decision.” Principal Carter emphasized that culturally responsive practice must be embedded across the curriculum, not confined to a single course or symbolic unit: “Being culturally responsive has to go beyond just teaching ethnic studies. It has to be interwoven in every lesson, every content, every discipline, every experience on that campus.”

Participants also described aligning staff practice through explicit, systemwide direction. Principal Whitfield framed restorative alignment and culturally responsive practice as a shared instructional expectation requiring training and coherence: “I informed my staff that, moving forward, we will be a restorative school. I’m going to train you guys up around that, so that we are aligned around being culturally responsive.” Principal Knox added a thick description that sharpened the understanding of how “culturally responsive instruction” was tethered to intellectual rigor and to changes in adult practice. He noted that while district-adopted curriculum can limit “wiggle room” in what is taught, leaders retain leverage over how rigor and student thinking are positioned in daily instruction: “We certainly do have control over how content curriculum is presented. We must make sure we keep the intellectual rigorous bar high.” He then named a specific instructional pattern he was actively working to disrupt: “There is too much of teachers talking at kids and not letting them do the thinking and the heavy

work.” He described moving from diagnosis to implementation once organizational conditions made it feasible to prioritize that work.

Principal Holloway described equity as measurable through access to advanced courses (AP/IB) and the availability of supports that make participation meaningful, rejecting “compliance enrollment,” in which students are placed in advanced courses without the instructional scaffolding that enables success. Principal Ellison described reviewing curriculum and supplementing texts to ensure representation of “all populations” and alignment with students’ lived experience. These examples correspond with CRSL research emphasizing audits of instructional materials for bias, professional learning in anti-racist teaching strategies, and modeling high expectations for all students (Gooden et al., 2023). Evidence of success was described as achievement growth among historically marginalized groups and visible diversification of instructional materials and pedagogy (Gooden et al., 2023).

CRSL Tenet 4: Advocating for culturally responsive leadership engagement practices within a community context

Finding 3D: Community engagement emphasized power-sharing, culturally specific partnerships, and co-ownership structures for marginalized families

Participants rejected narrow definitions of parental involvement that presume compliance with school-generated agendas. Instead, community engagement was described as power-sharing: creating mechanisms through which families, especially those historically marginalized, exercise voice, influence, and sustained participation. Implementation moves included hosting community forums in culturally relevant spaces, conducting neighborhood audits, and inviting community knowledge holders to define what educational justice should look like in the local context. Principal Ellison framed community engagement as service and representation, describing his leadership as rooted in responsibility to a community he identifies with: “I am accountable for all students, but it starts with those who look like me and are most underserved.” Principal Tate echoed this sentiment, “everyone who looks like me didn’t have the opportunities I had, so it’s up to me to show them and give them those opportunities.”

Principal Knox’s account added a detailed example of community engagement as an institutional design for access and capacity-building. He described multiple engagement structures: “Three rounds of parenting conferences” and “classes for parents where they can learn strategies to support their child with reading at home,” and he emphasized culturally and linguistically responsive targeting in the first cohort, which focused on Newcomer parents. He also described “coffee with the principal”. He identified a next-step gap aligned with power-sharing logic: Building affinity-based spaces for families (e.g., parents of students with disabilities, Black parents) to surface specific needs and strengthen voice through more culturally specific partnership structures. These accounts illustrate community engagement as institutional design work: Building durable partnership structures that outlast single initiatives or district mandates.

Evidence and assessment across CRSL: “Proof” blended outcome data with lived indicators

Participants’ assessment of impact reflected mixed evidentiary logic. Formal indicators included attendance patterns, discipline referrals, and academic benchmark data (e.g., i-Ready), used to identify inequities and monitor shifts over time. Informal indicators included changes in staff discourse, student trust, adult willingness to engage in discomfort, and the visibility of student voice and agency in school governance. Principal Holloway described using a three-part evaluation frame: (a) academics (access and supports in advanced pathways), (b) culture/climate (student experience and trusted adults), and (c) attendance/engagement patterns. Principal Ellison described drawing from multiple data sources (e.g., i-Ready, attendance, referrals) to identify needs and track equity concerns. Principal Knox similarly linked “proof” to adult accountability structures and instructional capacity-building, arguing that improved student outcomes require “accountability and focusing on competence,” and describing the use of job-embedded supports (“coaching for every teacher and weekly PLCs”) to strengthen adult practice while sustaining expectations. Across participants, “proof” was not reduced to a single metric; it was triangulated across quantitative outcomes and qualitative indicators of humanization and belonging.

Summary

The findings in Area 3 demonstrate the praxis of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), providing a practice-near validation of the framework introduced by Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016).

- Critical Consciousness: Participants’ ability to recognize and name inequity “head on” corroborates the first tenet of CRSL, while extending it by framing this consciousness as a form of “pattern recognition” forged through racialized life histories rather than just professional development.
- Inclusive Environments: The implementation of belonging systems, such as identity-affirming morning meetings, corroborates the work of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2002) on the necessity of incorporating students’ cultural backgrounds into the school’s daily fabric.
- Instructional Leadership: Participants’ focus on “interweaving” cultural responsiveness across all content areas, rather than symbolic gestures, corroborates Gay’s (2010) argument that culturally responsive teaching requires the transformation of the entire educational enterprise.
- Community Engagement: By moving from “involvement” to power-sharing, leaders corroborate Khalifa’s (2012) research on the principal as a community advocate who builds trust through visibility and co-ownership.

Finally, the participants’ use of “mixed evidentiary logic,” blending formal data with “lived indicators” like student trust, corroborates CRT’s insistence on the validity of lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. This finding extends the field by suggesting that equity-centered leadership is best measured through triangulation

across quantitative outcomes and qualitative humanization.

Taken together, Chapters 4 through 6 show how participants navigated systemic barriers by pairing culturally grounded care with strategic interpretation of institutional dynamics and the deliberate enactment of CRSL. The next chapter (Discussion and Implications) builds on these findings to consider what district systems, leadership preparation programs, and policy conditions must change to sustain and legitimize equity-centered African-American male principalship over time.

Chapter 7: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Chapter 7 interprets and synthesizes the findings of this qualitative ethnographic study in relation to the study's purpose, research questions, conceptual framework, and the scholarship reviewed in Chapter 2. The study explored how African-American male principals work to create equity-centered school environments. Chapters 4 through 6 presented a coherent navigation story across three analytic areas: (a) multilevel systemic barriers that constitute the terrain of equity-centered leadership, (b) culturally grounded care as an identity-informed leadership orientation, and (c) Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) as the implementation moves through which principals translate equity commitments into durable changes in belonging, instructional access, and community power-sharing.

This chapter advances beyond restating findings. It offers a multi-layered analysis that (a) identifies cross-case patterns and interpretive themes, (b) examines how the findings correspond with, contradict, or deepen prior research and theory, and (c) considers ambiguity, rival explanations, and the credibility of interpretations. This chapter concludes with implications for leadership practice, district policy, principal preparation, and future research, as well as a restatement of study limitations and considerations for transferability.

Revisiting the Study Purpose, Research Questions, and Conceptual Framework

The study was guided by a central inquiry into how African-American male principals draw upon their racialized lived experiences, personal backgrounds, and core beliefs to enact equity-oriented leadership practices that disrupt systemic racism and White supremacist ideologies, demonstrate care, and cultivate the tenets of Culturally Responsive School Leadership. This purpose was operationalized through three area-based research questions that examined: (1) multilevel barriers and sustaining supports across interpersonal, organizational, and sociopolitical contexts; (2) culturally grounded conceptions of care and their influence on day-to-day leadership sensemaking and practice; and (3) the ways principals interpret and enact the tenets of CRSL as equity-centered practice.

Two interlocking theoretical lenses were used to form a conceptual lens for interpretation and synthesis in this chapter: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and African American Male Theory (AAMT). CRT foregrounds how racism is embedded in institutional norms, policies, and so-called race-neutral practices, and legitimizes counter-storytelling as a method for naming and analyzing racialized experience (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). AAMT centers Black male subjectivity and supports a non-deficit understanding of African American male identity, agency, and resistance within racialized institutions (Bush & Bush, 2013). Together, these frameworks enable interpretation of participants' leadership as simultaneously relational, instructional, political, and moral work carried out under conditions of heightened scrutiny and persistent misrecognition.

The Equity Navigation Model - Equity Navigation as Terrain, Orientation, and Praxis

Across Chapters 4-6, participants' accounts can be synthesized through an analytic model of equity navigation with three interdependent elements. First, systemic barriers constitute the terrain of the work: interpersonal surveillance and credibility discounting, organizational constraint systems and adult protection routines, and sociopolitical pressures that shape risk, messaging, and time horizons. Second, culturally grounded care functions as an orientation and interpretive lens: it shapes what leaders notice, how they make meaning of student needs and conflict, and how they define equity as belonging and humanization. Third, CRSL represents praxis: the set of implementation moves that translate an equity stance into structures, routines, and accountability mechanisms that can outlast individual leaders and episodic initiatives.

This synthesis reframes the study's findings as more than a list of themes. It clarifies how identity-informed care and critical consciousness interact with institutional constraint and then materialize as leadership practice. In this view, equity leadership is best understood not as a fixed set of traits, but as a dynamic sequence of interpretive and strategic moves through which principals adapt, resist, and build systems in racialized organizational contexts.

Table 7.1. Equity Navigation Model (Synthesis Across Chapters 4-6)

Element	How it functions in the findings	Illustrative indicators
Terrain (Barriers as constraint architecture)	Constrains what leaders can say/do; produces hyper-visibility and misrecognition; narrows role expectations; increases risk and emotional labor.	Microaggressions, "angry" trope, credibility discounting, adult protection systems, reputational vulnerability, and political backlash.
Orientation (Care as equity stance)	Defines equity through belonging, dignity, and humanization; guides sensemaking, discipline approaches, and advocacy/resource decisions.	Relationship-centered routines; high expectations paired with affirmation; attention to students' felt experience of being seen.
Praxis (CRSL enactment as implementation moves)	Translates equity commitments into structures for belonging, instructional access, and community power-sharing; relies on coherence and accountability.	Equity audits; restorative alignment; curriculum representation audits; access to rigorous pathways; culturally specific engagement structures.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature and Conceptual Framework

Area 1: Barrier Ecology and the Architecture of Constraint

Area 1 findings suggest that participants navigated not a single barrier but a barrier ecology, interlocking constraints operating at interpersonal, organizational, and sociopolitical levels. Interpersonally, leaders encountered credibility discounting, microaggressions, othering, and hyper-visibility, which functioned through anticipatory judgment and required leaders to manage others' interpretations before addressing substantive equity issues. CRT is particularly useful here: it interprets these experiences not as isolated bias incidents but as expressions of systemic racialization embedded in professional interaction norms and institutional routines.

Organizationally, participants described role expectations and adult protection systems that constrained efforts to advance equity. What King (2016) has dubbed the “invisible tax” and role pigeonholing narrowed Black male principals' perceived value to discipline management, even as participants sought to lead instructional and equity agendas. This finding resonates with scholarship documenting how Black male administrators are often placed in high-need contexts, expected to absorb crisis conditions, and under-supported, which Callender (2020) identifies Pabon (2016) conceptualizing as a “Black Superman” paradox. The study extends this literature by clarifying the mechanisms through which organizational constraints operate (e.g., union escalation, HR routines, decision-making limitations) and by describing how these systems can redirect, delay, or dilute equity-centered action.

Socio-politically, participants framed equity leadership as public work shaped by community narratives, political discourse, and reputational vulnerability. This theme aligns with research emphasizing that equity leadership requires political discernment and strategic communication in contexts where anti-racist work is contested, surveilled, or reframed as divisive (Gooden et al., 2023). Importantly, participants described sociopolitical pressure as a standing condition rather than episodic controversy, which helps explain why equity work requires long-term pacing, risk assessment, and protective alliances.

The sustaining supports described in this study are best interpreted as protective infrastructure rather than generic wellness. Participants' emphasis on mentorship, affinity spaces, trusted supervisors, and identity-affirming networks demonstrates that retention and sustainability are organizational issues rather than merely individual coping. These supports functioned both as emotional protection against isolation and as strategic capacity-building, strengthening leaders' ability to read institutional dynamics, navigate conflict, and maintain a long-term equity agenda. This finding supports and deepens prior research identifying mentorship and affinity networks as critical supports for Black leaders, while clarifying that the function of these supports is directly tied to racialized misrecognition and the high interpretive demands of equity navigation.

Area 2: Culturally Grounded Care as Equity Praxis and Sensemaking

Participants' narratives position care as an equity stance rather than a personality trait. Care was defined through students lived experience of inclusion, visibility, and dignity, and through leaders' responsibility to hold high expectations while protecting students from deficit interpretations. This conceptualization aligns with scholarship on Black masculine caring and ethic-of-care leadership that locates care in action, advocacy, and institutional protection rather than sentimentality (Bass, 2019). Framed through CRT, care is also a form of resistance: it challenges race-neutral, punitive institutional logics by humanizing students who are often rendered as problems to be managed.

A key contribution of this study is its demonstration of how care operated as a sensemaking framework. Participants described interpreting conflict and behavior through bicultural fluency, recognizing institutional expectations while remaining attuned to cultural realities, trauma exposure, and structural need. This kind of interpretive work is consistent with AAMT's emphasis on Black male leaders' identity-informed agency and storytelling (Bush & Bush, 2013). It also extends CRSL scholarship by showing that critical consciousness begins at the level of everyday interpretation: equity work is initiated when leaders refuse deficit meaning-making and instead locate student behavior within social, historical, and institutional contexts.

At the practice level, care materialized as relationship-centered routines that shaped discipline and responses to conflict. This finding corresponds with literature that critiques exclusionary discipline as a mechanism of racial sorting and argues for restorative, humanizing approaches to school culture (Khalifa, 2018). However, participants' accounts also complicate simplistic narratives that equate relational approaches with "softness." Care was repeatedly tethered to accountability and high expectations, illustrating a disciplined form of caring leadership that holds students to rigorous standards while refusing to abandon them when they fall short.

The analysis also surfaced a predictable tradeoff: leading with care increased exposure to racialized misinterpretation, surveillance, and emotional labor, often requiring masking and strategic alliance-building. This tension aligns with research on racial battle fatigue and misrecognition experienced by Black leaders within Eurocentric norms of professionalism (Smith et al., 2020). The key interpretive point is that care itself becomes contested terrain. In systems where Black masculine leadership is read through stereotypes of aggression or incompetence, care-based advocacy can be re-coded as a threat, and high expectations can be misread as hostility. The costs described by participants are therefore not inherent to care; they are produced by institutional contexts that racialize interpretation.

Area 3: CRSL Enactment as Praxis Across Domains

Area 3 findings demonstrate that participants enacted CRSL not as an abstract framework but as praxis, context-specific implementation moves grounded in critical consciousness and oriented toward belonging, instructional access, and community

power-sharing. Across cases, critical consciousness was described as embodied “pattern recognition,” an analytic stance developed through lived experience and persistent exposure to racialized schooling conditions. This extends CRSL scholarship by emphasizing that critical consciousness is not only learned through formal professional development but also forged through racialized life histories, thereby sharpening leaders’ ability to identify inequity and to reject euphemistic “gap” language that diffuses accountability.

In building inclusive environments, participants foregrounded belonging systems, identity-affirming spaces, and coherence of adult practices. These findings align with CRSL’s emphasis on disrupting deficit orientations and building restorative, culturally affirming school cultures that reduce harm. The study contributes a practice-near description of how belonging is designed: morning meeting routines, schoolwide recognition systems anchored in shared values, and structures that amplify student voice and agency in governance.

In providing culturally responsive instructional leadership, participants emphasized equitable access to rigorous pathways, representation in curriculum and pedagogy, and alignment of adult learning systems. This finding aligns with CRSL scholarship that argues that culturally relevant pedagogy must be systematized through coherent professional learning, curriculum review, and shared expectations, rather than left to individual teachers’ preferences. Participants’ attention to coherence highlights a key leverage point for principals: even when district curriculum limits what is taught, leaders can influence how rigor, student thinking, and cultural relevance are positioned in daily instruction.

In community engagement, participants rejected compliance-based definitions of “involvement” and instead emphasized power-sharing and co-ownership. This aligns with research framing engagement as an institutional design that enables marginalized families to exercise their voice and influence (Gooden et al., 2023; Khalifa, 2018). Participants described implementation moves such as community forums in culturally relevant spaces, neighborhood audits, and affinity-based family structures. The interpretive implication is that engagement is not ancillary to instruction; it is a governance strategy that builds legitimacy, expands cultural knowledge, and creates durable accountability relationships.

Finally, participants’ approaches to evidence and assessment illuminate an important methodological and practical tension in equity work: they blended formal indicators (attendance, discipline, benchmark data) with lived indicators (changes in discourse, trust, student agency) to evaluate whether schools were becoming more humanizing and just. This “mixed evidentiary logic” suggests that equity leadership is not well-measured by a single metric. Instead, evaluation requires triangulation across outcomes and experiential indicators, an approach consistent with CRT’s insistence on the validity of lived experience as evidence and with qualitative research commitments to thick description.

Cross-Cutting Interpretive Themes

Misrecognition and Role Narrowing as Systemic Mechanisms

A consistent cross-case theme is misrecognition: participants' care-based advocacy and equity-oriented leadership were frequently interpreted through racialized stereotypes that narrowed how others understood their professional identity. Rather than being recognized as instructional leaders and system builders, African-American male principals were often positioned as discipline managers, crisis responders, or symbolic representatives. This role narrowing operates as a systemic mechanism: it both increases workload (through the "invisible tax") and reduces discretionary authority for equity work by tethering leaders to reactive tasks. Interpreted through CRT, misrecognition functions as a form of institutional power that shapes which leadership behaviors are considered legitimate and which are treated as suspect.

This theme also helps explain why participants described strategic alliance-building, message calibration, and behavioral "vacillation" (e.g., selective engagement, strategic silence) as necessary leadership competencies. These were not character flaws; they were adaptive strategies for sustaining equity agendas under surveillance. A key implication is that professional "fit" and "communication style" evaluations can conceal racialized judgment. Districts that do not explicitly interrogate these interpretive dynamics risk reproducing inequity in principal evaluation, support, and retention.

Equity Work as Institutional Design Under Constraint

Across all three analytic areas, participants described equity work as institutional design: building routines, structures, and accountability systems that change the default experiences of students and families. Yet the design work was carried out under constraint architecture, organizational routines, and political conditions that limited timing, discretion, and coalition strength. This reframes equity leadership as a problem of organizational conditions, not merely leaders' will. Even leaders with strong critical consciousness and moral commitment require enabling conditions to build coherent systems: stable staffing, protected decision rights, meaningful support, and district-level alignment that does not undercut equity agendas through race-neutral compliance demands.

This theme deepens CRSL by clarifying that implementation is inseparable from organizational capacity and political legitimacy. CRSL moves (e.g., restorative alignment, curriculum audits, engagement redesign) are not simply "best practices" to adopt; they require negotiated authority, adult learning capacity, and protection from backlash. When those conditions are absent, leaders must spend disproportionate time navigating barriers, thereby delaying or fragmenting the implementation of equity.

Protective Infrastructure as a Condition of Sustainability

Sustaining supports emerged as an integral component of equity navigation. Mentorship and affinity networks were not peripheral supports; they served as protective infrastructure that countered isolation, supported sensemaking, and provided strategic counsel for navigating racialized conflict. Viewed through AAMT, these networks also function as identity-affirming spaces that protect Black male subjectivity from institutional deficit narratives. The study thus suggests that retention of African-American male principals is not only a recruitment problem. It is a design problem: districts must build infrastructure that normalizes support, protects equity leadership, and reduces dependence on informal or external networks for basic survival and strategy.

The findings also raise an equity question about who bears the cost of sustaining equity leadership. When protective infrastructure is not built into district systems, leaders of color are left to construct survival ecosystems on their own time and at their own emotional labor. This shifts organizational responsibility onto individuals and may partially explain turnover, burnout, and leadership pipeline fragility documented in the literature.

Ambiguities, Inconsistencies, and Rival Explanations

Qualitative interpretation requires tolerance for ambiguity and an explicit search for rival explanations. Several findings, while coherent across cases, invite careful qualification. First, some barriers described by participants resemble challenges experienced by many principals regardless of race (e.g., labor systems, staffing instability, community conflict). A plausible rival explanation is therefore that the findings reflect principalship in high-demand settings rather than race-specific dynamics. The study's contribution is not to deny this overlap, but to demonstrate how racialization changes the meaning and consequences of common leadership challenges. For example, organizational overload becomes qualitatively different when paired with hyper-visibility, credibility discounting, and stereotypes that make ordinary conflict management read as personal threat or incompetence.

Second, variation across cases suggests that context moderates the experience of constraint. Participants led in different school levels, district types, and community demographics; some described stronger internal supports, while others described limited onboarding and highly punitive accountability conditions. These differences matter for interpretation: they imply that barriers are not inevitable outcomes of race alone, but are intensified or mitigated by organizational design and local politics. This also indicates a practical pathway for change; districts can alter conditions that amplify misrecognition and constraint.

Third, the study surfaced tension between relational leadership and competence-based accountability. In at least one account, district norms were perceived to overvalue relational approach while underweighting competence, producing mixed signals about

what “good leadership” looks like. A rival interpretation is that participants’ critique reflects personal leadership style preferences. However, interpreted through CRT and AAMT, this tension can also be read as a structural dilemma: relational expectations may be differently imposed on Black male leaders, or used as a proxy for “non-threatening” behavior, thereby constraining direct equity advocacy. The most plausible explanation is not either/or; it is that leadership expectations are mediated by context, race, and the politics of interpretation.

Finally, participants’ approaches to evidence suggest an unresolved ambiguity in equity evaluation. Leaders blended quantitative and qualitative indicators, which strengthens interpretive validity but also raises questions about consistency and comparability across sites. One rival explanation is that mixed evidentiary logic invites confirmation bias (leaders see what they want to see). The counter-argument, consistent with qualitative epistemology and CRT, is that equity work requires multiple forms of evidence because single-metric accountability can conceal harm. This tension should be treated as a design challenge for districts and researchers: building valid, context-sensitive equity indicators that remain robust against selective interpretation.

Trustworthiness and Integrity of the Interpretations

The credibility and plausibility of this chapter’s interpretations rest on analytic procedures described in Chapter 3 and applied throughout the study. The coding strategy intentionally combined deductive codes derived from the study’s conceptual frameworks (CRT and AAMT) with inductive codes that surfaced unanticipated patterns. Constant comparative methods strengthened internal coherence by testing emerging categories across participants and across data segments.

To address researcher bias and strengthen dependability, the study incorporated analyst triangulation by having an experienced qualitative researcher review a subset of coded transcripts and the codebook. Interpretive disagreements were treated as analytic resources rather than problems to suppress; they prompted clarification of code definitions and tighter links between claims and evidence. Credibility was further supported through verification steps such as searching for disconfirming evidence and revisiting raw data to test emerging claims.

Finally, this study’s interpretive integrity is inseparable from positionality. As a practitioner-scholar and an African American male educator and leader, the researcher’s standpoint provided deep access to culturally grounded meaning-making but also required disciplined reflexivity. Reflexive journaling, analytic memo writing, and consultation with critical friends were used to examine assumptions, surface potential blind spots, and ensure that interpretations remained accountable to participants’ narratives. The goal is not neutrality, but transparency and rigor, an explicit accounting of how meaning was co-constructed and verified. In this spirit, findings were presented to support naturalistic generalization, enabling readers in similar contexts to consider how the interpretations may illuminate their own settings.

Limitations and Considerations for Transferability

Several limitations bound the claims that can be made from this study. First, the study relied primarily on semi-structured interviews, which privilege participants' sensemaking and retrospective interpretation. While this aligns with the study's purpose and theoretical grounding in counter-storytelling, it also means that the findings reflect narrated experience rather than direct observation of practice. Second, the participant group was drawn from a specific geographic and policy context (California) and from leaders who were willing to participate in an equity-focused study. Self-selection may therefore tilt the sample toward principals who are particularly reflective, critically conscious, or engaged in equity-centered work.

Third, because the study prioritizes depth over breadth, the findings should not be treated as statistically generalizable. They are transferable to the extent that readers recognize resonance with their own contexts and can map the identified mechanisms (misrecognition, role narrowing, constraint architecture, protective infrastructure) onto local conditions. Transferability is strengthened through thick description and cross-case comparison, but it remains the reader's responsibility to assess fit. Future work that includes longitudinal observation, document analysis, and broader sampling across regions would further test and refine the proposed equity navigation model.

Implications for District and School Leadership Practice

Treat equity leadership as system building, not heroic individual effort. Districts should align schedules, staffing, professional learning, and accountability systems so principals can design coherent routines for belonging, instruction, and engagement. When equity work is added to already overloaded roles without enabling conditions, implementation becomes fragmented, and leaders are forced into reactive crisis management.

Reduce the "invisible tax" and role pigeonholing. District leaders should audit how work is distributed across principals and how leaders are informally assigned "discipline specialist" roles. Equity-centered principal evaluation should explicitly value instructional leadership, coherence-building, and community power-sharing, rather than relying on vague "style" judgments that can conceal racialized interpretations.

Build protective infrastructure as a formal district responsibility. Mentorship structures, affinity networks, and identity-affirming leadership communities should be institutionalized rather than left to informal networks. Districts can create protected time for affinity-based leadership cohorts, establish sponsorship structures for principals of color, and develop rapid-response support protocols when leaders face public backlash.

Strengthen the evidence ecology for equity. Participants' mixed evidentiary logic suggests that districts should pair outcome data with valid qualitative indicators (student trust, belonging, adult discourse shifts) to monitor equity progress. Creating coherent equity scorecards that include both quantitative and experiential measures can reduce the risk of single-metric distortions and make equity work more legible and defensible.

Implications for Principal Preparation and Professional Learning

Preparation programs and district induction should explicitly address identity-informed leadership. This includes supporting candidates in anticipating and interpreting misrecognition, developing strategic communication under surveillance, and building coalition and conflict navigation skills without abandoning equity commitments. Programs should integrate CRT, AAMT, and CRSL not only as theoretical content but as practice tools, case-based analysis, simulation of political dilemmas, and design studios where candidates build belonging systems, instructional coherence plans, and engagement structures.

Professional learning should also expand beyond compliance training. Participants' accounts suggest that leaders need structured opportunities to develop skills in equity audits, curriculum representation analysis, restorative alignment, adult learning design, and community power-sharing. Districts should create job-embedded coaching and inquiry cycles that focus on implementation and coherence, not just awareness.

Implications for Policy

At the policy level, the findings support targeted investment in recruitment, retention, and protection of African-American male principals. Policies that merely encourage diversification without changing organizational conditions will reproduce turnover. District and state leaders should consider: (a) equity-focused leadership pipeline funding that includes mentorship and sponsorship; (b) transparent, equitable principal placement practices that avoid concentrating leaders of color in the most unstable contexts without commensurate resources; and (c) evaluation and due-process protections that guard against racially coded backlash and reputational vulnerability.

Implications for Theory

The study contributes a practice-near synthesis that links CRT and AAMT to the applied domain of CRSL. CRT explains the systemic nature of misrecognition, role narrowing, and race-neutral constraint systems; AAMT centers the identity-informed agency and resilience strategies of African American male leaders; CRSL names the actionable domains through which equity commitments become organizational practice. The equity navigation model proposed here suggests a theoretical refinement: culturally grounded care and critical consciousness are not separable from implementation; they are the interpretive engines that enable CRSL praxis under constraint. Future theorizing can examine how different forms of care (protective, instructional, political) interact with specific constraint architectures to produce distinct pathways of equity change.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should test and extend the equity navigation model through longitudinal designs that include direct observation of leadership practice, document analysis of district policies and evaluation processes, and multi-perspective data (e.g., teachers,

students, supervisors). Comparative studies could examine how African-American male principals' navigation differs across regions, governance contexts, and accountability regimes, and how protective infrastructure changes retention and equity outcomes. Research that examines intersections (e.g., sexuality, disability, language background) and that compares experiences across gender within Black principalship would also deepen understanding of how racialized and gendered expectations are produced and contested.

Conclusion

This chapter synthesized findings across three analytic areas to interpret how African-American male principals navigate systemic barriers as they build equity-centered school environments. The findings suggest that equity leadership is best understood as navigation: multilevel barriers constitute a terrain of constraint and misrecognition; culturally grounded care provides an orientation and moral stance; and CRSL enactment represents praxis, implementation moves that build belonging, instructional access, and shared power with communities. The study's most consequential implication is practical and structural: sustaining African-American male principals' equity work requires not only valuing their leadership but also redesigning the organizational conditions that govern legitimacy, workload, support, and protection. Doing so strengthens not only individual leaders but also the equity capacity of school systems.

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