

**Black Excellence Revealed: The Lived Experiences of Black Male Principals in Urban
Midwestern Schools: Challenges, Rewards,
and Culturally Responsive Leadership**

By

Rodney Lynk Jr.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2025

Date of final oral examination: 12/9/2025

The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Sara Jimenez Soffa, Clinical Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

Jessica Stovall, Assistant Professor, African American Studies

Peter Miller, Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

Suzanne Eckes, Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of eight Black male principals who sustained leadership for more than three years in urban Midwestern schools serving predominantly students of color. Grounded in the methods of Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990), the research sought to uncover the essence of what enables these leaders to remain and thrive amid the racialized, high-pressure contexts that often lead to principal turnover. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, analytic memos, and document analysis, then analyzed through horizontalization and thematic synthesis.

Four major themes emerged: (1) resisting deficit beliefs and stereotypes that devalue Black students and communities; (2) building schools as community-centered spaces that honor cultural wealth; (3) sustaining leadership amid isolation and struggle through faith, resilience, and brotherhood; and (4) leading with moral purpose and legacy that extends beyond personal tenure. These themes converge in what the study defines as the *Sustained Leadership Mindset*, a moral and cultural orientation that links personal endurance to collective transformation.

Findings affirm and extend four theoretical frameworks: Critical Race Theory, Culturally Responsive School Leadership, Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership. Together, these frameworks illustrate that the sustainability of Black male principals arises not from solitary strength but from communal grounding, moral conviction, and culturally responsive practice. The study offers implications for leadership preparation, mentorship, and policy, emphasizing that recruiting Black leaders is not enough; systems must also sustain them through networks of belonging, reflective practice, and institutional care. Ultimately, this work positions sustained Black male leadership as both a form of resistance and a pathway toward educational justice, demonstrating that when leaders remain rooted in purpose, they transform the schools and the communities they serve.

Keywords: Black male principals; culturally responsive school leadership; resilience; transformational leadership; Critical Race Theory; phenomenology; leadership sustainability; educational equity

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Table of Contents	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Research Problem	1
Main Research Question	5
Sub-Questions	5
Theoretical Framework	6
<i>Critical Race Theory (CRT)</i>	7
<i>Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)</i>	7
<i>Resilience Theory</i>	8
<i>Transformational Leadership Theory</i>	9
<i>Integrated Framework and Regional Application</i>	9
Definition of Terms	14
Chapter 2: Literature Review	19
Theoretical Frameworks in Literature	31
<i>Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)</i>	31
<i>Resilience Theory</i>	35
<i>Transformational Leadership</i>	36
Gaps in the Literature	38
Chapter 3: Methodology	44
Research Design	45
Sampling Strategy	50
Recruitment Procedures	50
Addressing Recruitment Challenges	51
Sample Size	51
Ethical Considerations in Recruitment	52
Primary Data Collection Methods	53
<i>Semi-Structured Interviews</i>	53
<i>Supplementary Data Collection Methods</i>	54
Data Collection Tools	54
Pilot Testing of Tools	55
Ethical Considerations in Data Collection for the Pilot Testing	55

Triangulation	55
<i>Addressing Researcher Bias</i>	62
Ethical Considerations	62
Informed Consent	63
Confidentiality and Anonymity	63
Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval	64
Mitigating Power Dynamics	65
Highlighting Ethical Challenges	65
Publication and Dissemination of Findings	65
Methodological Limitations	66
Contextual Limitations	67
Chapter 4: Findings	71
Overview of the Analytic Process	73
P1 – David	79
P2 – Marcus	79
P3 – Anthony	80
P4 – James	80
P5 – Christopher	81
P6 – Jerome	81
P7 – Lawrence	82
P8 – Terrence	82
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications	116
Introduction	116
<i>Building Schools as Community-Centered Spaces</i>	120
<i>Sustaining Leadership Amid Isolation and Struggle</i>	121
<i>Leading with Moral Purpose and Legacy</i>	122
<i>Integrative Reflection</i>	122
<i>Strengthening Leadership Preparation and Mentorship</i>	127
References	138
Appendix	142
Appendix A: Informed Consent Form	142
Introduction	143
Purpose of the Study	143

Procedures	144
Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw	144
Potential Risks and Benefits	144
Confidentiality	145
Compensation	145
Questions and Contact Information	145
Consent Statement	146
Appendix B: Interview Questions	146
Title of Study:	146
Purpose:	146
Interview Structure	147
1. Introduction (5 minutes)	147
2. Background and Context (10 minutes)	147
3. Leadership Experiences and Challenges (15–20 minutes)	147
4. Culturally Responsive Leadership (15 minutes)	148
5. Rewards and Retention (15 minutes)	148
6. Looking Ahead - Future Policies (10 minutes)	148
7. Closing	149

Chapter 1: Introduction

The underrepresentation of Black male principals in urban schools is a critical issue in educational leadership, with far-reaching implications for educational equity, student success, and community well-being. Black male principals play a unique role in addressing opportunity gaps, fostering culturally affirming environments, and advocating for systemic change in schools that predominantly serve Black and Brown students.

In the present context, Black male principals face the dual burden of addressing systemic barriers while navigating the racialized expectations of leadership. They are often expected to serve as disciplinarians, advocates, and cultural role models for students and communities, roles that amplify the emotional labor and professional challenges associated with their positions (Khalifa, 2013). These realities make the retention and success of Black male principals both a critical concern and an opportunity for systemic change in urban education. This study explores their lived experiences, challenges, and leadership practices, focusing on how they navigate these barriers and sustain academic improvement in under-resourced schools.

Research Problem

The central problem this study addresses is the ongoing underrepresentation and uneven retention of Black male principals in urban schools. This concern is especially significant in Midwestern cities, where patterns of segregation, economic inequality, and limited access to resources create difficult working conditions for school leaders. Although Black male principals are essential to the development of culturally responsive school climates and to academic improvement, they continue to face barriers that include discriminatory hiring practices, limited access to mentorship, racialized expectations, and cultural taxation (Gooden, 2012; Khalifa et al.,

2016). These factors contribute to burnout and higher rates of departure, which then undermine school stability and long-term academic progress (Branch et al., 2013).

This challenge is also linked to the historical removal of Black principals after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, which led to the loss of culturally grounded leadership in many Black communities. The impacts of this displacement are still evident today, as Black male principals often feel pressure to act as cultural advocates, community leaders, and behavioral supports while also handling the academic and operational demands of their schools (Khalifa, 2013; Tillman, 2004).

Although scholars have documented barriers faced by Black principals more broadly, there is limited research on the experiences of Black male principals in the Midwest. This represents a significant gap because Midwestern cities have unique social and historical conditions, including long-standing segregation and concentrated poverty. There is also limited scholarship on how Black male principals in this region remain in their positions beyond three years and how they confront the racialized aspects of their roles.

In addition, few studies bring together insights from Critical Race Theory, Culturally Responsive School Leadership, Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership to examine Black male principalship as a sustained leadership experience. This integration is necessary for understanding the full complexity of the work, including the strategies Black male principals use to persist, the challenges they navigate, and the practices that support long-term success.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools who have remained in their roles for more than three years. The goal is to understand how they persevere in the face of systemic challenges, how they implement culturally grounded and transformational leadership practices, and how they foster

ongoing academic improvement. The findings of this study inform leadership preparation programs, district policies, and community-based efforts aimed at recruiting, supporting, and retaining Black male school leaders. In summary, the research problem centers on the systemic inequities and structural barriers that impede Black male principals from achieving and sustaining leadership in urban schools. These challenges are compounded by the historical exclusion of Black leaders, the high demands of equity-driven leadership, and the unique socio-economic dynamics of urban Midwestern schools. By exploring the lived experiences, challenges, and leadership practices of Black male principals, this study aims to address critical gaps in the literature and inform policies and practices that support their retention and success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and leadership practices of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools. Specifically, this research sought to understand how these leaders navigate systemic inequities, foster culturally affirming environments, and sustain their leadership in contexts characterized by limited resources and high-stakes accountability pressures. Black male principals are uniquely positioned to serve as cultural advocates, equity champions, and community leaders in schools that predominantly serve Black and Brown students. However, their retention and success are often hindered by systemic barriers, such as racial bias, professional isolation, and inequitable access to resources (Khalifa et al., 2016; Gooden, 2012).

This study was grounded in the recognition that Black male principals play a critical role in addressing the educational debt owed to marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Their leadership has the potential to close opportunity gaps, inspire systemic change, and empower students and families. Yet, high turnover among urban principals disrupts school

progress and diminishes opportunities to implement equity-driven practices (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). These challenges are particularly pronounced in the Midwest, a region historically marked by patterns of segregation, concentrated poverty, and funding inequities that exacerbate educational disparities. Understanding how Black male principals sustain their leadership in such contexts is essential for promoting stability and equity in urban schools. The study emphasizes leadership sustainability as a key focus, given its importance for fostering long-term academic improvement and ensuring continuity in school communities. Retaining effective leaders is vital for building trust, improving student outcomes, and cultivating a positive school culture. This research explores the intrinsic motivations, coping mechanisms, and community supports that enable Black male principals to thrive in challenging environments. Drawing on Resilience Theory (Masten, 2001), the study examines how these leaders adapt and persist despite the systemic barriers they face, highlighting the personal and professional factors that contribute to their resilience. Additionally, the study focuses on culturally responsive leadership as a cornerstone of equity-driven practices in urban education. Through the lens of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), the research investigates how Black male principals create affirming spaces for students, engage families and communities, and address systemic inequities. CRSL emphasizes critical self-awareness, equity-oriented decision-making, and community-centered advocacy (Khalifa et al., 2016), all of which align with the strategies employed by Black male principals to promote student success and challenge inequitable systems.

This research also addresses specific gaps in the literature. While existing studies broadly explore systemic barriers, few examine how Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools sustain their leadership while implementing culturally responsive practices. Furthermore, limited

scholarship integrates Critical Race Theory (CRT), CRSL, Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory to examine the intersection of systemic inequities and leadership sustainability. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on educational leadership, offering actionable insights for district leaders, policymakers, and educators seeking to support Black male principals effectively. In summary, I will illuminate the complex dynamics of Black male leadership in urban Midwestern schools. By exploring their lived experiences, leadership practices, and resilience strategies, the research seeks to inform policies, practices, and professional development programs that promote equity, stability, and cultural responsiveness in schools serving marginalized communities. Building on this purpose, the study's research questions aim to delve deeper into the systemic and personal factors shaping the experiences of Black male principals.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are carefully crafted to align with its theoretical frameworks, purpose, and significance, ensuring a focused and thorough exploration of the lived experiences, challenges, and leadership practices of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools. These questions address systemic, personal, and cultural factors while maintaining a manageable scope for detailed analysis.

Main Research Question

- What are the lived experiences of Black male principals who sustain leadership for more than three years in urban Midwestern school settings with predominantly students of color, and how do they achieve and maintain academic improvement during their tenure?

Sub-Questions

1. Challenges and Barriers:
 - What systemic challenges and barriers do Black male principals encounter in urban school settings?
2. Motivation and Retention:
 - What factors influence Black male principals to remain in their leadership roles beyond three years?
3. Leadership Practices and Impact:
 - How do culturally responsive leadership practices influence their persistence and school success?
4. Systemic Supports:
 - What systemic supports (e.g., mentorship, policy changes, or community engagement) are essential for sustaining Black male principals in urban educational settings?

Theoretical Framework

This study employed a multi-framework approach to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and leadership practices of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools. The complexity of the research problem, encompassing systemic inequities, cultural responsiveness, leadership sustainability, and personal resilience, necessitates integrating four complementary frameworks: Critical Race Theory (CRT), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory. These frameworks collectively provide a robust lens to examine how Black male principals navigate systemic barriers, foster culturally affirming school environments, and sustain their leadership.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) serves as a foundational framework for this study, emphasizing the pervasiveness of systemic racism and its impact on institutions, including education. Developed by scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, CRT challenges dominant ideologies of neutrality and meritocracy, exposing how racial inequities are embedded within societal structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Central to CRT is the use of counter-narratives, which amplify the voices of marginalized individuals and provide insight into their lived experiences. In this study, CRT illuminates the systemic challenges faced by Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools, where they encounter discriminatory hiring practices, racial bias in school policies, and expectations to perform additional emotional and cultural labor (Khalifa et al., 2016). For example, the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* displacement of Black school leaders (Tillman, 2004) highlights how systemic racism has long shaped educational leadership opportunities. CRT provides a lens to analyze how Black male principals resist these barriers while fostering equitable and inclusive school cultures. CRT directly informs the sub-question: *What systemic challenges and barriers do Black male principals encounter in urban school settings?* This framework highlights structural inequities that constrain leadership opportunities and illuminate the necessity for systemic change.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), as articulated by Khalifa et al. (2016), extends Ladson-Billings' (1995) work on culturally relevant pedagogy into the domain of school leadership. CRSL emphasizes critical self-awareness, equity-driven practices, and community

engagement, enabling leaders to create affirming environments that validate cultural identities while addressing systemic inequities. This framework is vital for understanding how Black male principals implement culturally responsive strategies to promote academic success. For example, CRSL encourages adapting curricula to reflect students' cultural backgrounds, advocating for equity in disciplinary policies, and building partnerships with families and communities. Khalifa et al. (2016) assert that culturally responsive leaders challenge deficit-based narratives, aligning closely with the goals of Black male principals in fostering equity and inclusion. CRSL informs the sub-question: *How do culturally responsive leadership practices contribute to the academic and social success of students in schools led by Black male principals?* It provides a framework for analyzing strategies that address opportunity gaps and affirm students' cultural identities.

Resilience Theory

Resilience Theory, as conceptualized by Masten (2001), examines how individuals adapt and thrive in the face of adversity. Resilience is not merely an individual trait, but a dynamic process influenced by environmental factors, such as community support and access to resources. For Black male principals, resilience is essential for navigating systemic challenges, sustaining their leadership, and maintaining their commitment to equity-driven practices. This study employs Resilience Theory to explore intrinsic motivations (e.g., personal values, self-efficacy) and extrinsic supports (e.g., mentorship, professional networks, supportive policies) that enable Black male principals to persist in challenging environments. Gooden (2012) highlights that culturally affirming spaces and community connections are critical for fostering resilience among Black leaders. In urban Midwestern schools, where resource disparities are pronounced, these supports are especially significant. Resilience Theory aligns with the sub-question: *What*

factors influence Black male principals to remain in their leadership roles beyond three years? It provides insight into the personal and systemic factors that sustain these leaders.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by Bass (1985), focuses on inspiring and mobilizing individuals toward shared goals. Transformational leaders engage in vision-setting, foster collaboration, and build organizational capacity, making them effective agents of change in challenging contexts. For Black male principals, transformational leadership often entails balancing operational demands with equity-driven goals while inspiring staff and engaging communities. This framework offers insight into how Black male principals foster trust, build capacity within their teams, and implement long-term strategies for academic improvement. Khalifa (2013) highlights how transformational leadership aligns with culturally responsive practices, empowering school communities to address systemic inequities collaboratively. Transformational Leadership Theory informs the sub-question: *What systemic supports (e.g., mentorship, policy changes, or community engagement) are essential for sustaining Black male principals in urban educational settings?* It highlights how external supports enable transformational practices and promote leadership sustainability.

Integrated Framework and Regional Application

These four frameworks work together to provide a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of Black male principals. Their integration ensures a comprehensive approach to addressing the study's purpose: to explore systemic, cultural, and personal dimensions of leadership in urban Midwestern schools. For instance:

- CRT explores the systemic barriers and racialized experiences of Black male principals.

- CRSL examines their leadership practices to affirm cultural identities, promote equity and foster an inclusive school culture.
- Resilience Theory investigates the coping mechanisms and the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that sustain their leadership.
- Transformational Leadership Theory analyzes their strategies for inspiring and mobilizing school communities to address systemic needs.

Regional application is particularly important in the Midwest, where entrenched patterns of segregation and funding inequities create unique challenges. These frameworks help contextualize the specific barriers and opportunities for Black male principals in this setting, ensuring that the study's findings are both locally relevant and broadly applicable.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant potential to contribute to the field of education by addressing critical issues such as the opportunity gap, principal retention, and equity in urban schools. By exploring the lived experiences, challenges, and leadership practices of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools, the study aims to fill key gaps in the literature and offer actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders.

The opportunity gap reflects systemic disparities in access to high-quality education, resources, and support, disproportionately impacting Black and Brown students. Black male principals, as culturally responsive leaders, are uniquely positioned to address this gap by creating school environments that validate students' cultural identities and promote academic success. Using Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) as a lens, this study examines how Black male principals implement equity-driven strategies, such as adapting curriculum to reflect diverse cultural backgrounds, advocating for fair disciplinary policies, and fostering

meaningful community partnerships (Khalifa et al., 2016). The findings from this study highlight specific practices that help close the opportunity gap. For example, culturally responsive leadership often challenges deficit-based narratives about marginalized students and focuses on empowering communities. By documenting these practices, the study advances scholarly understanding and provides practical recommendations for leadership training programs, ensuring that future school leaders are equipped to promote equity and inclusion.

Principal retention is a persistent challenge in urban education, where high turnover rates disrupt school stability and hinder long-term improvement. Black male principals face unique retention challenges, including racial bias, professional isolation, and the dual burden of administrative responsibilities and cultural advocacy (Gooden, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016). These systemic barriers contribute to burnout, further exacerbating leadership gaps in urban schools. This study investigates factors that sustain Black male principals in their roles, focusing on both intrinsic motivations (e.g., personal commitment to equity) and extrinsic supports (e.g., mentorship, professional networks, and policy changes). Drawing on Resilience Theory (Masten, 2001), the research identifies strategies that enable these leaders to navigate adversity while remaining committed to their roles. For instance, the study reveals how mentorship programs or district-level support systems contribute to leadership sustainability. These insights can inform targeted retention strategies, ultimately enhancing the stability and effectiveness of urban schools.

Equity is a central theme of this research, which examines how Black male principals advocate for systemic change and create inclusive school environments. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study explores how systemic racism shapes the leadership experiences of Black male principals and how they work to dismantle these barriers (Delgado & Stefancic,

2017). Transformational Leadership Theory complements this analysis by focusing on how these leaders inspire their teams, build organizational capacity, and mobilize communities to address disparities (Bass, 1985). The study documents how Black male principals foster equity through practices such as engaging families in decision-making, addressing disparities in resource allocation, and creating culturally affirming spaces for students. These findings have the potential to shape equity-focused initiatives, offering strategies that school leaders nationwide can implement.

The significance of this study is directly tied to its research questions, ensuring alignment with its purpose and theoretical frameworks: 1) exploring the systemic barriers faced by Black male principals, the study addresses the challenges these leaders encounter in urban school settings, 2) investigating the factors that sustain their leadership aligns with questions about motivation and retention, 3) examining culturally responsive leadership practices contributes to understanding how these strategies promote student success and equity and 4) analyzing systemic supports identifies actionable solutions for sustaining Black male principals in their roles.

This study's focus on urban Midwestern schools adds an essential layer of context. The Midwest is characterized by entrenched patterns of racial segregation, funding inequities, and socio-economic disparities, making it a critical region for understanding the intersection of systemic barriers and leadership practices. By centering this region, the research provides insights into how Black male principals navigate these unique challenges while fostering equity and academic improvement. These regional insights also offer broader applicability for understanding leadership in similarly underserved communities. In summary, the specific

contributions of this study to scholarship and practice are detailed in Table 1: Potential Contributions of the Study.

Table 1

Potential Contributions of the Study

Focus Areas	Impact
Theoretical Contributions:	Integrating CRT, CRSL, Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between systemic inequities, culturally responsive practices, and leadership sustainability.
Practical Implications:	Findings from this study can inform professional development programs, emphasizing resilience-building strategies, culturally responsive practices, and equity-focused leadership. These insights can guide the design of mentorship programs and district policies that prioritize diversity and inclusion in school leadership.
Policy Implications:	The study's findings can influence district- and state-level policies related to principal retention, hiring practices, and resource allocation. For example, recommendations may include implementing anti-bias training for administrators or establishing leadership pipelines that prioritize equity.

<p>Community Engagement:</p>	<p>Highlighting the role of community partnerships in supporting Black male principals emphasize the importance of collaboration between schools and communities. These findings can inspire models for community engagement that strengthen school support systems.</p>
<p>National Relevance:</p>	<p>While focused on the Midwest, the study's findings have broader applicability for addressing equity-driven leadership challenges in urban schools across the nation. By centering the voices of Black male principals, the research challenges dominant narratives and advocates for systemic reforms.</p>

As illustrated in Table 1, the significance of this phenomenological inquiry extends across multiple domains. Theoretically, the study offers an integrated framework for analyzing leadership sustainability through the lenses of CRT, CRSL, Resilience, and Transformational Leadership. Practically, the findings offer actionable guidance for professional development and mentorship programs aimed at strengthening the recruitment and retention of Black male principals. Ultimately, the table underscores the study's goal of influencing policy decisions regarding equity and stability in urban school leadership.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters, each serving a specific purpose in addressing the research questions and achieving the study's objectives. The structure ensures a logical flow from introducing the research problem to presenting findings and implications.

Definition of Terms

Affinity Network. A professional community or collective that provides emotional, social, and professional support to leaders who share common identities or experiences. In this study, the term refers to formal and informal networks among Black male principals that foster resilience, affirmation, and belonging.

Bracketing (Epoché). A phenomenological practice in which the researcher consciously identifies and suspends personal assumptions, biases, and experiences to authentically understand participants' perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

Community-Centered School. A school that functions as an extension of the neighborhood it serves, where students, families, and educators co-construct the learning environment through shared ownership, cultural celebration, and mutual accountability.

Counter-Storytelling. A central method in Critical Race Theory used to challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate racial inequities. Counter-storytelling amplifies marginalized voices and redefines how knowledge and identity are understood within education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Cultural Wealth. The collective assets, knowledge, skills, and resources found within communities of color that counter deficit perspectives in education (Yosso, 2005).

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL). A leadership framework that integrates critical self-awareness, inclusive school environments, culturally responsive pedagogy, and meaningful community engagement to promote equity and affirm students' identities (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Deficit Beliefs. Negative or limiting assumptions about the capacity, motivation, or intelligence of students and families from marginalized backgrounds. Such beliefs lead to lowered expectations and inequitable school practices.

Educational Leadership. The practice of guiding, inspiring, and supporting students, teachers, and communities through vision, strategy, and moral purpose. In this study, educational leadership is viewed as culturally and socially responsive work that integrates academic excellence with equity and belonging.

Equity. The commitment to creating fair and just educational conditions by recognizing and addressing systemic inequities in opportunity, access, and outcomes. Equity in this study is both structural and relational, requiring leaders to transform systems while caring for individuals.

Horizontalization. A key process in phenomenological analysis where each statement or expression of meaning is treated with equal value before clustering them into broader thematic structures (Moustakas, 1994).

Isolation. A sense of professional and emotional distance experienced by principals who feel disconnected from peers, district systems, or community allies. In this study, isolation reflects both structural exclusion and the internal pressures of racial representation.

Lived Experience. The firsthand, subjective meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences with a phenomenon. In phenomenology, lived experience is the primary source of knowledge used to uncover essence (van Manen, 1990).

Moral Purpose. The ethical and value-driven motivation that guides leaders' decisions, rooted in a commitment to justice, care, and the holistic development of students and staff (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1992).

Phenomenology. A qualitative research approach that seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences as perceived by individuals directly involved in a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

Resilience. The capacity to adapt, endure, and remain purpose-driven amid adversity. In this study, resilience is conceptualized not as individual toughness but as a communal and moral process sustained by faith, relationships, and shared mission (Gu & Day, 2013; Masten, 2014).

Socioeconomic Status (SES). A multidimensional measure of an individual's or family's social and economic position, commonly based on income, education, and occupation. In this study, SES contextualizes the economic realities of families and students served by urban schools.

Sustained Leadership. Leadership that endures over time and is rooted in purpose, authenticity, and care. The term reflects persistence beyond tenure length, emphasizing moral and cultural sustainability rather than mere longevity.

Transformational Leadership. A leadership theory emphasizing vision, moral influence, and collective empowerment. Transformational leaders motivate followers through integrity, shared purpose, and inspiration to achieve common goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Urban Education. A field and setting characterized by schools located in densely populated areas that often serve racially and culturally diverse student populations, frequently shaped by historical inequities, concentrated poverty, and resource disparities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to present a clear and focused review of the scholarship that informs this study's examination of the experiences and leadership practices of Black male principals in urban schools in the Midwest. This review is organized into four sections that build the foundation for understanding the complexity of equity-centered leadership in these settings. The first section provides a historical overview of Black principalship in the United States, including the community leadership that developed during segregation, the widespread displacement that followed the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and the continued underrepresentation of Black leaders in schools today. The second section explores the systemic challenges that shape the daily work of Black male principals, including racial bias, discriminatory hiring practices, professional isolation, and the expectation that they serve as cultural advocates as well as administrators. The third section explores what motivates and retains Black principals. The fourth section examines research on culturally responsive and equity-focused leadership to illustrate how Black principals create inclusive school environments, challenge long-standing inequities, and promote improved student outcomes. The final section identifies gaps in the existing literature, with particular attention to the limited research on Black male principals in Midwestern urban schools and the need to better understand how they sustain their leadership over time. Together, these sections establish the scholarly context and rationale for the methodological choices presented in Chapter 3.

Historical Context of Black Principalship

The history of Black principals in American education is deeply intertwined with the broader struggle for racial equity, educational access, and leadership representation. Black school leaders have historically played a dual role as educators and community advocates, particularly

in the era of segregated schooling. However, their presence and influence in public education have been shaped and often curtailed by systemic racial policies, particularly in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

This section explores the historical trajectory of Black principals across three key periods:

1. The Pre-*Brown* Era, where Black principals led segregated schools and served as pillars of their communities despite resource inequities.
2. The post-*Brown* Era, in which Black principals faced widespread displacement and systemic exclusion following desegregation policies.
3. The Contemporary Context examines the ongoing underrepresentation of Black principals and the structural barriers that persist in school leadership today.

Understanding this historical context provides a foundation for examining how these past challenges continue to shape the experiences of Black principals in urban schools today.

During the era of racial segregation in the United States, Black principals held a unique and powerful position in Black communities. They filled many roles, including school administrators, civic leaders, activists, and mentors who played an essential role in shaping the educational experiences of Black students (Walker, 2009). Given the limited access to educational resources in segregated Black schools, principals often took on expanded responsibilities to advocate for funding, organize teacher training, and create culturally affirming curricula that instilled pride and resilience in their students (Tillman, 2004). In many segregated schools, Black principals were deeply embedded in the social and political fabric of their communities. They worked closely with Black churches, local businesses, and civil rights organizations to ensure that students received both academic instruction and life skills necessary to navigate a racially hostile society (Walker, 2009). The importance of these leaders extended

beyond their schools, as they served as liaisons between their communities and local governments, advocating for policy changes and educational equity. Despite their strong leadership and community engagement, Black principals faced severe systemic inequities in terms of funding, facilities, and curriculum quality. Segregated Black schools were chronically underfunded compared to their white counterparts, receiving significantly fewer resources from state and local governments (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Classrooms were often overcrowded, textbooks were outdated and hand-me-downs from white schools, and school infrastructure was neglected. Nevertheless, Black principals and educators developed innovative strategies to counteract these disparities. Many schools relied on fundraising efforts, community donations, and grassroots advocacy to secure educational materials and improve school conditions (Walker, 2009). Black principals also took on the role of resistance leaders, fighting against discriminatory policies and ensuring that Black students had access to a quality education despite systemic barriers. Their efforts laid the foundation for culturally responsive education, emphasizing Black history, resilience, and self-determination as core components of the school experience. These practices continue to influence modern frameworks such as Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa et al., 2016).

The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was a landmark moment in the fight for racial equity in education, ruling that school segregation was unconstitutional. However, while the ruling sought to create greater educational access for Black students, it also led to the widespread displacement of Black educators and principals. As schools began to integrate, thousands of Black schools were closed or consolidated, and Black principals were systematically excluded from leadership roles in newly desegregated schools (Tillman, 2004). White school boards, which controlled hiring decisions, frequently refused to

appoint Black administrators to leadership positions, arguing that Black principals were unqualified to lead integrated schools (Tillman, 2004). Many Black principals, despite holding equal or superior credentials to their white counterparts, found themselves demoted to assistant principal positions, reassigned to menial roles, or forced out of the profession entirely (Walker, 2009). This displacement had long-term consequences for Black educational leadership. With fewer Black principals in leadership roles, Black students in integrated schools often found themselves in environments that did not affirm their cultural identities or reflect the leadership they had once known. Schools that had once been hubs of Black empowerment and community engagement were now controlled by white administrators who were often less invested in the success of Black students (Tillman, 2004). Fenwick (2022) provides further insight into the scale and impact of this systemic displacement in *Jim Crow's Pink Slip*, revealing that over 100,000 Black principals and teachers were unjustly dismissed or demoted following desegregation. This removal of Black educators did not occur by accident; it was a deliberate policy choice by white-controlled school boards, who prioritized placing white teachers and administrators in leadership positions over retaining experienced Black educators. As a result, Black students were deprived of culturally responsive school leaders, and the pipeline for future Black educators was also severely disrupted. The exclusion of Black teachers and principals fractured long-standing community ties, making it significantly harder for Black students to receive mentorship from educators who understood their cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Fenwick's work further links this historical displacement to contemporary disparities in school leadership, noting that the loss of Black educational leadership post-*Brown* contributed to the ongoing underrepresentation of Black principals in U.S. public schools today. This systemic exclusion, coupled with ongoing hiring discrimination and racialized barriers to advancement, continues to

affect Black educators' ability to move into and sustain leadership positions (Fenwick, 2022). As a result, the educational inequities that Black students face today, like higher disciplinary rates, disproportionate tracking into lower academic courses, and limited access to culturally affirming curricula, can be traced back to the leadership losses caused by post-*Brown* policy failures (Fenwick, 2022).

While *Brown v. Board* was framed as a victory for civil rights, Tillman (2004) argues that the Supreme Court's focus on the psychological harm of segregation rather than structural inequalities in the education system shaped desegregation policies in ways that ignored the systemic barriers that Black schools, teachers, and administrators had long faced. Rather than integrating Black educators into leadership positions, desegregation efforts often led to the closing of Black schools and the removal of Black school leaders from the profession (Tillman, 2004). This oversight is evident in the dramatic decline of Black principals following *Brown v. Board*. Instead of integrating Black educators into leadership positions within newly desegregated schools, white school boards systematically excluded them, reinforcing pre-existing racial hierarchies within the education system (Gladwell, 2019).

This leadership gap is largely a result of: discriminatory hiring and promotion practices (Gooden, 2012), lack of mentorship and professional development opportunities (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013) and the concentration of Black principals in underfunded, high-need schools, where they face intense leadership burdens, including the pressure to close achievement gaps, navigate systemic racism, and advocate for equity (Gooden, 2012). The historical and contemporary underrepresentation of Black principals in American education is rooted in systemic exclusion that began post-Brown and continues today. By acknowledging both the historical role of Black principals and the contemporary barriers they face, this research

underscores the importance of developing intentional strategies to support Black educators in reclaiming their leadership roles in urban schools.

Systemic Challenges and Racialized Experiences

Black male principals in urban school settings experience a unique and compounding set of challenges. They have many responsibilities, including managing the operational and instructional demands of school leadership. They are also burdened with the expectation to advocate for racial equity in a system that has historically marginalized them. Unlike their white counterparts, who often have the privilege of focusing solely on academic leadership, Black principals frequently find themselves navigating racialized resistance, professional isolation, and systemic barriers that undermine their authority and limit their opportunities for advancement (Khalifa et al., 2016). This section examines the systemic racism embedded in educational leadership and the professional isolation Black male principals experience. It also analyzes their dual burden of advocacy and administration, a labor-intensive and emotionally taxing responsibility that forces these leaders to simultaneously uphold school excellence while resisting institutional discrimination. The underrepresentation of Black male principals in leadership is not coincidental. Systemic exclusion in hiring and promotion processes is partly responsible for the lack of Black principals in public schools. Research indicates that Black educators are often overlooked for leadership roles due to implicit biases, racialized gatekeeping, and the perception that white leadership styles are the norm (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). While public education increasingly serves racially diverse student populations, leadership remains predominantly white, with only 10% of principals identifying as Black compared to 77% white (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). Hiring biases manifest through coded language in evaluations, such as Black candidates being labeled as "too aggressive" or "not a good fit" for school culture (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). One Black principal in Khalifa et al.'s (2016) study shared:

"I had more experience and a better track record than the white candidates who got the job, but I was told they were looking for someone with a 'community-friendly' leadership style. That was coded language—I knew exactly what they meant."

This structural exclusion limits career advancement opportunities and forces Black leaders to overperform while still being under-promoted.

Even when Black principals attain leadership positions, they face persistent microaggressions and implicit biases that undermine their credibility. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), racialized scrutiny affects Black professionals in leadership, where their expertise is questioned more often than their white counterparts. These biases contribute to an exhausting and demoralizing work environment. Black principals frequently experience skepticism from teachers, parents, and even district officials regarding their competence and decision-making. One principal in Khalifa et al.'s (2016) study recounted:

"I can make the same decision that a white principal makes, and for them, it's leadership. For me, it's 'too authoritarian' or 'controversial.'"

This racialized scrutiny creates additional stress for Black male principals, as they must navigate the fine line between being assertive and being labeled as a problem since this was a reality their white peers rarely encounter.

Black male principals often lack access to mentorship and professional networks that reflect their experiences. Traditional leadership development programs are structured around white, middle-class leadership norms, leaving Black principals without the necessary cultural competence training to navigate racialized challenges (Khalifa et al., 2016). Mentorship programs are disproportionately white led, which can create barriers in receiving guidance on the racialized aspects of school leadership. The absence of Black mentors reinforces a cycle of

professional isolation, where Black principals struggle to find senior leaders who can advocate for them. Many Black male principals report being the only Black leader in district meetings, principal cohorts, or professional organizations (Gooden, 2012). This isolation fosters a heightened sense of hypervisibility for leaders where every one of their actions is scrutinized. Black leaders are also expected to represent all Black perspectives, adding emotional and psychological weight to their leadership.

One principal from Khalifa et al. (2016) reflected:

"When you're the only Black principal in the district, you don't just represent yourself. You represent every Black administrator who comes after you."

This tokenization effect adds pressure and limits their ability to be their full selves in professional spaces.

Unlike white principals, Black male principals are expected to play many roles. They are expected to serve as racial equity advocates while also ensuring their schools meet performance metrics. This expectation creates a double workload where they must address curriculum inequities, discipline disparities, and teacher biases, all while maintaining school operations (Khalifa et al., 2016). This dual burden often places Black principals at odds with district policies. Research has shown that when Black principals push for anti-racist disciplinary policies or culturally responsive curricula, they face backlash from school boards, staff, and parent groups (Khalifa, 2012). This pushback can take the form of budget cuts, increased scrutiny, or outright removal. The emotional labor of being a Black principal in a white-dominated system contributes to what Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) term "racial battle fatigue", which is defined as the cumulative stress and exhaustion that comes from navigating systemic racism. Black male principals must self-monitor their tone, word choice, and demeanor to avoid being

labeled as “angry” or “combative.” This hyper-awareness leads to burnout, mental exhaustion, and higher turnover rates. One principal from Khalifa et al. (2016) stated:

“Some days, I leave work feeling like I’ve fought ten battles and won none.”

Despite their proven effectiveness in improving school culture and student outcomes, Black principals continue to face systemic pushback.

Black male principals in urban schools carry the dual burden of administration and racial justice advocacy, making their work uniquely challenging. They are systematically underrepresented in leadership, face microaggressions, experience professional isolation, and are expected to single-handedly reform racial inequities in their schools. Despite these barriers, Black principals continue to transform school environments and improve student outcomes. However, without intentional policy changes, structural support, and leadership training programs tailored to their needs, the education system will continue to marginalize their contributions.

Motivation and Retention of Black Male Principals

Black male principals play a critical role in urban schools, serving as leaders, advocates, and change agents in historically marginalized communities. Their motivation to lead is often deeply intrinsic, rooted in a commitment to addressing systemic inequities and improving student outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2006). However, the extrinsic challenges associated with the role of leadership including lack of institutional support, heightened scrutiny, and burnout significantly impact principals’ ability to remain in leadership roles long-term. This section explores the intrinsic motivations that drive Black male principals, the extrinsic pressures that undermine their retention, and the emotional labor borne by principals, students, staff, and families when

turnover occurs in urban school leadership. Additionally, it examines policy-driven retention solutions and district-led interventions that could mitigate these challenges.

One of the primary reasons Black male principals enter and remain in school leadership is their deep-seated commitment to addressing educational inequities. Ladson-Billings (2006) refers to the “educational debt” that communities of color have accumulated due to historical disinvestment, segregation, and systemic racism in public education. Black principals often see their leadership as an opportunity to pay down this debt by creating better conditions for students who have been historically underserved. These leaders view their work as a form of activism, challenging unfair policies, implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, and working to close the opportunity gap between Black students and their peers. One principal from Khalifa et al. (2016) stated:

“I wake up every morning knowing that I am here because my students deserve someone who looks like them and believes in them. If I don’t fight for them, who will?”

Despite this powerful intrinsic drive, the reality of institutional barriers often wears down even the most committed leaders. Many Black male principals internalize a strong sense of duty to both their students and their communities. Their cultural responsibility extends beyond academic leadership to include mentorship, father-figure roles, and community advocacy (Gooden, 2012). This resilience is developed through personal experiences of overcoming adversity, often shaping their leadership philosophy. However, this deep personal connection to the work often leads to self-sacrifice, making these leaders more susceptible to burnout. The weight of being a role model, disciplinarian, motivator, and change agent simultaneously is exhausting, especially when paired with extrinsic challenges that work against their success.

While intrinsic motivation fuels Black male principals, extrinsic factors often erode their commitment and push them out of leadership roles. These include lack of mentorship, insufficient professional support, and the overwhelming emotional labor required to navigate systemic racism in leadership. Leadership in urban schools is isolating, particularly for Black male principals who often find themselves as the only person of color in district leadership meetings (Gooden, 2012). Traditional mentorship and professional networks are often white-dominated and fail to address the racialized challenges that Black principals face. The absence of culturally competent support structures leaves them vulnerable to professional isolation, limiting their access to career advancement opportunities (Branch et al., 2013).

“I don’t have the same informal networks that my white colleagues do. They get opportunities and support through backchannels that I don’t have access to.” Black principal, Khalifa et al. (2016)

Some districts have piloted mentorship initiatives specifically tailored for Black male principals, pairing them with veteran administrators who have successfully navigated racialized leadership challenges (Smith, 2020). Expanding such programs could address isolation and career stagnation, ultimately improving retention rates.

Black male principals often derive motivation from community recognition and engagement. Seeing students succeed, gaining the respect of families, and knowing they are making a tangible impact reinforces their commitment to the role. However, when their efforts go unrecognized by district leadership or are met with resistance from unsupportive school boards and policymakers, it can create feelings of futility and disillusionment. Research suggests that principals who feel undervalued and overburdened are twice as likely to leave their roles (Branch et al., 2013). Districts must be intentional about recognizing and celebrating Black

principals' contributions through awards, leadership pathways, and public acknowledgment, reinforcing job satisfaction and retention (Johnson, 2021).

As we continue to provide an equitable education for the marginalized youth, Black Male Principals play a top role in that however they are under attack with the decision of staying in this stressful role in toxic environments. The high attrition rates among Black male principals are a direct result of unaddressed extrinsic stressors. Research by Branch et al. (2013) found that urban school principals, particularly Black males, have one of the highest turnover rates in education, with an average tenure of just 3-5 years. Key factors include: 1) unrealistic expectations placed upon them due to racialized perceptions of leadership, 2) resistance to culturally responsive reforms from district leadership and policymakers and 3) limited pathways for promotion, causing stagnation and frustration. The result is a constant cycle of turnover, which negatively impacts the entire school community. Frequent leadership changes disrupt staff morale, student achievement, and family engagement. Research shows that 65% of Black male principals cite emotional exhaustion as a leading factor in leaving their roles, compared to 40% of white principals (Anderson & Thomas, 2019). This demonstrates how burnout disproportionately affects leaders of color.

Black male principals are intrinsically motivated by a deep commitment to social justice, cultural responsibility, and improving outcomes for students of color. However, extrinsic stressors such as lack of mentorship, systemic barriers, and emotional labor eat away at this motivation, leading to high turnover rates. The retention of Black male principals is not just an issue of professional development; it is a matter of institutional responsibility. Without intentional efforts to support, mentor, and recognize these leaders, urban schools will continue to experience leadership instability, student disengagement, and weakened school communities.

Theoretical Frameworks in Literature

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) serves as both a theoretical and practical framework aimed at advancing equity and cultural affirmation in urban schools. CRSL is a critical approach to educational leadership that centers the needs of historically marginalized students by fostering inclusive school environments, critically examining systemic inequities, and promoting culturally relevant pedagogy and policies (Khalifa et al., 2016). The following section outlines key principles of CRSL, practical strategies used by Black school leaders to implement CRSL, and its connection to addressing educational debt. CRSL is defined as the ability of school leaders to create school environments and curricula that respond effectively to the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of minoritized students (Khalifa et al., 2016). CRSL rests upon four core principles: critical self-awareness, equity-driven practices, community advocacy, and culturally inclusive school environments. The first core principle, critical self-awareness, ensures that leaders engage in ongoing self-reflection to recognize biases, privileges, and systemic inequities that shape educational practices. This self-awareness is crucial in understanding how leadership decisions impact minoritized students (Khalifa et al., 2016). For example, CRSL leaders often participate in bias training and personal reflection exercises to continuously examine their leadership approach (Allen, 2023). Ladson-Billings (2009) underscores the importance of self-reflection in teaching, emphasizing that effective educators acknowledge cultural differences and adapt instruction accordingly. The second principle, equity-driven practices, emphasizes the intentional dismantling of structural barriers that prevent equitable opportunities for all students. This includes reforming discipline policies, increasing access to advanced coursework, and ensuring culturally relevant curricula (Laughlin,

2023). Studies show that implementing equitable hiring practices and increasing teacher diversity also contribute to positive student outcomes (Allen, 2023). Ladson-Billings (2009) highlights that culturally responsive teaching must go beyond simple inclusion, instead requiring systemic change to ensure sustained equity for all students. The third principle, community advocacy, insists leaders actively engage with the communities they serve, recognizing that families and local organizations are integral partners in student success. This involves advocating for policies that reflect the cultural and social realities of students (Khalifa et al., 2016). Successful school leaders create advisory boards with parents and community members to ensure consistent engagement and policy alignment (Allen, 2023). *The Dreamkeepers* emphasizes that building trust with families and communities is key to ensuring culturally responsive school leadership. The fourth core principle, culturally inclusive school environments, pushes leaders to cultivate a school culture that affirms diverse identities and makes all students feel valued. This requires a commitment to embedding students' cultural backgrounds into daily educational practices (Laughlin, 2023). Schools that implement culturally inclusive teaching practices see improved student engagement and higher academic performance (Allen, 2023). Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts that culturally responsive leaders should work to sustain students' home cultures while equipping them with skills necessary for academic success.

Black principals and other school leaders employ a range of strategies to implement CRSL effectively. These strategies include 1) affirming cultural identities, 2) fostering inclusive school environments, 3) empowering teachers as culturally responsive educators, and 4) engaging families and communities. In strategy 1, affirming cultural identities, school leaders intentionally celebrate cultural heritage through curriculum design, school events, and representation in staff hiring. For example, Black school leaders have integrated African

American literature, history, and culturally relevant instructional methods into their schools to empower students (Laughlin, 2023). Case studies have shown that embedding student cultures into daily practices fosters a stronger sense of belonging (Allen, 2023). *The Dreamkeepers* highlight that culturally affirming curriculum is key to making students feel seen and valued in the learning process. In strategy 2, fostering inclusive school environments, successful CRSL initiatives include restorative justice practices that replace punitive discipline policies, mentorship programs that connect students with culturally similar role models, and professional development for teachers on anti-racist and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Khalifa et al., 2016). Schools that replace zero-tolerance policies with restorative justice approaches see significant declines in suspensions and behavioral issues (Allen, 2023). Ladson-Billings (2009) advocates for school environments where students are empowered rather than punished for their cultural differences. In strategy 3, empowering teachers as culturally responsive educators, CRSL leaders provide continuous training and support to help teachers implement culturally relevant teaching strategies. This includes professional learning communities focused on addressing biases, analyzing disparities in student achievement, and adapting instructional practices to be more inclusive (Laughlin, 2023). Research highlights that sustained professional development leads to long-term improvement in instructional equity (Allen, 2023). *The Dreamkeepers* argue that effective culturally responsive teaching stems from a commitment to lifelong learning and adaptation to meet student needs. In strategy 4, engaging families and communities, CRSL leaders build strong relationships with parents and local organizations by hosting culturally inclusive family engagement nights, collaborating with grassroots organizations, and advocating for community-centered policy changes (Khalifa et al., 2016). Community engagement programs increase student achievement and school-wide accountability

(Allen, 2023). Ladson-Billings (2009) discusses the power of strong home-school partnerships in creating culturally responsive educational experiences.

CRSL serves as a critical tool for addressing educational debt. Educational debt differs from financial debt in that it refers to the accumulated disadvantages experienced by historically marginalized students due to systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Through culturally responsive leadership, school leaders actively work to disrupt cycles of inequity by challenging deficit-based narratives. CRSL leaders reject narratives that portray Black and Brown students as inherently at risk or deficient. Instead, they center students' cultural strengths as assets within the learning process (Khalifa et al., 2016). Research suggests that students perform better academically when their cultural identity is affirmed in the school environment (Allen, 2023). *The Dreamkeepers* reiterate that recognizing students' cultural strengths is key to dismantling deficit-based narratives.

CRSL is an essential framework for fostering educational equity and affirming the cultural identities of students in urban schools. By emphasizing critical self-awareness, equity-driven leadership, community engagement, and inclusive school environments, CRSL provides school leaders with the necessary tools to challenge systemic inequities and create spaces where all students thrive. As educational institutions continue to diversify, the implementation of CRSL remains a pivotal strategy for achieving meaningful and lasting school transformation.

Black male principals in urban school settings navigate significant systemic challenges while striving to create inclusive, high-achieving educational environments. Resilience Theory and Transformational Leadership provide insight into how these leaders sustain themselves and drive change in their schools. Resilience Theory explains how individuals adapt to adversity and maintain effectiveness despite systemic obstacles (Masten, 2001). Transformational Leadership

focuses on inspiring and mobilizing communities to achieve collective goals (Bass, 1985). However, these frameworks alone do not fully capture the unique lived experiences of Black male principals, who also operate within racialized power structures that shape their leadership. Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa et al., 2016) serves as an essential bridge, integrating resilience and transformational leadership with practices that challenge systemic inequities and empower students and staff. This section explores how Black male principals employ these frameworks to persist in their roles and transform their schools.

Resilience Theory

Resilience Theory, as conceptualized by Masten (2001), emphasizes adaptive responses to adversity. For Black male principals, resilience is not just about personal endurance but about actively shaping school climates despite systemic inequities. Unlike conventional leadership frameworks, CRSL incorporates a moral imperative for leaders to recognize and dismantle educational injustices while maintaining personal well-being (Khalifa et al., 2016). Black male principals often operate in school environments where they contend with racial bias, disproportionate accountability pressures, and limited institutional support.

Resilient leaders employ various coping mechanisms to sustain their effectiveness, including self-reflection and emotional regulation, strategic problem solving, and adaptive leadership. Resilient leaders who utilize self-reflection and emotional regulation are usually principals engaged in mindfulness, journaling, and professional coaching to manage stress and maintain clarity in decision-making (Masten, 2001). CRSL further emphasizes critical self-awareness, pushing leaders to interrogate how their own leadership practices either resist or reproduce systemic inequities (Khalifa et al., 2016). Resilient leaders who display strategic problem-solving analyze systemic barriers and create data-driven strategies to address disparities

in discipline, achievement, and staff development (Gooden, 2012). Lastly, resilient leaders who exemplify adaptive leadership pivot when faced with setbacks, finding alternative pathways to achieve their school improvement goals (Ledesma, 2014).

Resilient leaders do not operate in isolation. They cultivate networks of support that provide encouragement, insight, and institutional leverage through mentorship and peer support, faith-based and cultural connections and district and policy advocacy networks. In relation to mentorship and peer support, many Black male principals participate in professional organizations such as the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) to exchange strategies and gain affirmation in their leadership roles (Gooden, 2012). Studies indicate that formal mentorship programs significantly improve Black school leaders' retention and longevity (Khalifa, 2016). Additionally, as it pertains to faith based and cultural connections, spiritual communities and culturally affirming networks serve as emotional anchors, helping leaders maintain purpose and perspective (Walker, 2020). In relation to district and policy advocacy networks, Black principals align themselves with equity-focused coalitions to change policies that negatively impact students of color, ensuring their leadership extends beyond the school level (Khalifa, 2018).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational Leadership, introduced by Bass (1985), describes leadership that inspires, motivates, and cultivates organizational change. Black male principals who adopt transformational leadership practices create inclusive, high-performing school cultures that empower students and staff. Transformational leaders operate through four core principles: 1) idealized influence, 2) inspirational motivation, 3) intellectual stimulation, and 4) individualized considerations. The 1st principle, idealized influence, is when principals model integrity and

vision, demonstrating the behaviors and expectations they wish to see in their staff and students (Bass, 1985). The 2nd principle, inspirational motivation, is when leaders set high expectations and articulate a compelling vision for equity and excellence (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). The 3rd principle, intellectual stimulation, is when transformational principals challenge teachers to think critically and innovate in their instructional methods (Bass, 1998). Lastly, the 4th principle, individualized consideration, is when leaders mentor and develop their staff, recognizing each educator's strengths and growth areas (Northouse, 2016).

Black male principals apply transformational leadership in practical ways such as revamping school discipline policies, creating culturally responsive curriculum and empowering teachers as equity champions. When black principals revamp policies they shift from punitive measures to restorative justice practices, leaders reduce suspension rates and improve student engagement (Khalifa, 2018). In creating culturally responsive curriculum, transformational principals integrate Black and Latinx histories into lesson plans, ensuring students see themselves reflected in their education (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Lastly, when empowering teachers as equity champions, they facilitate targeted professional development, and principals equip teachers with anti-racist pedagogical tools and classroom strategies (Allen, 2023).

While resilience enables Black male principals to persist and adapt, transformational leadership allows them to mobilize communities and create lasting change. However, CRSL provides a necessary framework that explicitly connects these theories to anti-oppressive leadership practices. CRSL is the Moral Compass! Unlike traditional leadership frameworks, CRSL mandates critical self-awareness and proactive policy advocacy, ensuring school leaders directly address racialized educational inequities (Khalifa et al., 2016).

A study of a Black male principal in an urban Midwest district (Walker, 2020) illustrates how these frameworks intersect. Faced with high teacher turnover and low student engagement, this principal built a professional network of Black male educators to exchange strategies and reduce burnout, implemented culturally relevant pedagogy to increase student performance and engagement, redefined discipline policies using restorative justice, cutting suspension rates by 40% and created mentorship programs for Black boys, resulting in higher graduation rates and increased college acceptance. His success highlights how resilience fuels transformational leadership, with CRSL serving as the moral framework that ensures equity-driven, systemic change. Resilience, Transformational Leadership, and CRSL collectively sustain and empower Black male principals in urban schools. By leveraging coping mechanisms, professional networks, and equity-driven leadership, these principals navigate systemic challenges while inspiring transformative change. Future research should explore how district policies and leadership development programs can better support Black male principals in sustaining long-term school transformation.

Gaps in the Literature

A review of existing scholarship on Black male principals in urban schools reveals several significant gaps that underscore the necessity of this study. While research has explored educational leadership, culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL), critical race theory (CRT), resilience theory, and transformational leadership, few studies have examined how these frameworks intersect in the lived experiences of Black male principals in Midwestern urban school districts. Additionally, research on retention strategies remains largely theoretical, lacking actionable solutions tailored to the unique challenges these principals face. This section identifies these gaps and highlights how this study contributes to addressing them. Additionally, much of

the current research on Black male educational leadership focuses on Southern and the East Coast (Khalifa et al., 2016). The Midwest is a region with unique socio-political dynamics affecting school leadership, and it remains underexplored. Black male principals in Midwestern urban schools often operate in racially polarized environments where they must balance community expectations, systemic constraints, and racialized professional scrutiny (Gooden, 2012). Although phenomenological interviewing has been used to explore the experiences of Black educators, these studies seldom focus on principals specifically, nor do they examine how regional differences impact leadership and retention. Additionally, recent data suggest that Black principals comprise only 6% of all school leaders in Midwestern urban districts, compared to 12% in the South and 10% on the East Coast (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). Understanding how Black male principals navigate Midwestern urban districts is critical for developing regionally responsive strategies to support and retain them.

While Critical Race Theory (CRT), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership have been applied individually to educational leadership, there is little research that integrates these frameworks to examine Black male principal experiences. Current literature typically applies these theories in isolation, missing the opportunity to explore how they interact to shape leadership styles, decision-making, and resilience. CRT emphasizes systemic racism in educational structures but lacks direct application to leadership retention and principal experiences. CRSL focuses on inclusive school leadership practices, yet most research applies it to teachers rather than school leaders (Khalifa et al., 2016). Resilience Theory highlights how leaders overcome adversity, but there is insufficient research on how Black male principals sustain resilience over time.

Transformational Leadership theory provides insights into motivational leadership, but little is known about how Black male principals apply it while managing racialized stressors.

Recent studies suggest that integrating these frameworks can provide a more holistic understanding of Black male principal leadership, enabling the development of more effective professional development models and retention policies (Johnson & Williams, 2021). However, empirical research combining these perspectives remains limited, leaving a critical gap in educational leadership scholarship.

Research acknowledges the high turnover rates of Black male principals (Branch et al., 2013), yet few studies propose concrete, evidence-based solutions to improve retention. Most scholarship identifies challenges (e.g., professional isolation, lack of mentorship, systemic racism) but offers few specific interventions. Additionally, existing studies lack a policy focus on retention, often framing Black male principals' experiences as inevitable rather than preventable. There is a pressing need for research that translates findings into policy recommendations for district leaders, policymakers, and education advocates. Emerging research suggests that district-led mentorship programs tailored specifically to Black male principals reduce professional isolation and improve retention rates (Smith & Allen, 2020). However, such models have not been widely adopted, and there is little research on their long-term effectiveness.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by examining the lived experiences of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools, integrating CRT, CRSL, Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership, and identifying practical retention strategies. By addressing these underexplored areas, this research provides a comprehensive framework for supporting,

retaining, and empowering Black male principals, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and effective educational leadership landscape.

This literature review has provided a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences, challenges, and motivations of Black male principals in urban schools. By analyzing systemic barriers, professional isolation, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic stressors, and retention challenges, this chapter has illuminated the unique struggles these leaders face. The review has also highlighted the intersections of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership, underscoring the need for a holistic approach to understanding and supporting Black male principals. Key findings from the literature include:

1. Systemic Barriers & Racialized Leadership Challenges – Black male principals navigate discriminatory hiring practices, implicit biases, and microaggressions, which contribute to professional isolation and career stagnation.
2. The Dual Burden of Advocacy and Administration – These leaders must simultaneously manage school operations and push for racial equity, often with little institutional support.
3. Intrinsic Motivation vs. Extrinsic Challenges – While many Black male principals are deeply motivated by a commitment to equity and student success, burnout, lack of mentorship, and limited professional networks undermine their ability to sustain long-term leadership.
4. Gaps in Theoretical Integration – Few studies have examined how CRT, CRSL, Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership intersect to shape leadership practices and policy solutions.

5. Need for Actionable Retention Strategies – Existing research has largely identified challenges but has failed to provide practical, evidence-based strategies to retain and support Black male principals.

Conclusion

This study is essential in filling critical gaps in the literature, particularly in its focus on Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools, a region that remains underexplored in educational leadership research. By integrating CRT, CRSL, Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership, this research provides a multifaceted understanding of the systemic and psychological dynamics impacting Black male principals. Furthermore, by identifying concrete retention strategies, this study aims to move beyond theoretical discourse and offer actionable recommendations that can influence policy, leadership preparation, and district-level support systems. Unlike previous studies, this research goes beyond identifying barriers to propose structured, district-led interventions that can improve retention, leadership development, and institutional support. This contribution is crucial because existing research has not fully explored how a multi-theoretical framework can directly inform educational leadership policies in a way that is applicable and scalable across diverse school settings (Johnson & Williams, 2021). Moreover, findings from this study could be applied to mentorship programs, district hiring policies, and professional development initiatives aimed at retaining Black male principals. By providing actionable solutions, this research can bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring its impact extends beyond academia to real-world educational settings.

With the foundation set by this literature review, Chapter 3 details the methodological framework used to explore the experiences of Black male principals. Given the narrative depth and lived experiences central to this study, a qualitative research approach, utilizing

phenomenological interviewing, was employed. This methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of personal and professional journeys, ensuring that the voices of Black male principals are central to the research findings. By using phenomenological interviewing, this study directly addresses the gap in firsthand, lived-experience accounts that provide nuanced insights into the challenges and successes of Black male principals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method ensures that leadership experiences are captured in authentic and contextually relevant ways, enabling a deeper understanding of how resilience, racialized leadership experiences, and institutional barriers intersect in real-world settings. Additionally, Chapter 3 outlines the data collection process, participant selection criteria, and ethical considerations, ensuring that the study is conducted rigorously and ethically. By building on the themes identified in this chapter, Chapter 3 provides the methodological roadmap for how this study captures, analyzes, and interprets the lived experiences of Black male principals, contributing to a more equitable and informed approach to educational leadership research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodology used to explore the lived experiences of Black male principals who have sustained leadership for more than three years in urban Midwestern schools with predominantly students of color. This chapter provides a comprehensive explanation of the research design, data collection methods, data analysis strategies, and ethical considerations. The methodology ensures methodological rigor and transparency while aligning with the study's theoretical frameworks and purpose. The goal is to understand how these leaders achieve and maintain academic improvement despite systemic challenges.

A qualitative phenomenological approach was selected for this study because of its focus on understanding and describing human experiences. Moustakas (1994) defines phenomenology as “the study of human experiences and the ways in which they are consciously perceived and described by individuals” (p. 84). This method allowed the researcher to explore the essence of Black male principals' experiences and identify common themes that reveal how they navigate systemic inequities while maintaining academic success.

Creswell (2017) highlights that qualitative research is particularly well-suited for studies that seek to “understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 16). Given the complex, intersectional challenges faced by Black male principals in urban settings, this methodology is ideal for capturing the depth and richness of their narratives. It also aligns with the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership, which guide the study's design and interpretation.

This chapter begins by describing the qualitative phenomenological approach and justifying its alignment with the study's purpose. The subsequent sections detail the participant selection criteria, data collection methods, analytical strategies, and measures to ensure trustworthiness. Ethical considerations and limitations of the study are also discussed. Together, these components ensure the study adheres to rigorous academic standards and provides valuable insights into the unique experiences of Black male principals.

Research Design

In alignment with Ladson-Billings' (2000) critique of Eurocentric epistemologies, this study employed a phenomenological approach to ensure that the voices of Black male principals, in urban Midwestern schools, are centered in the analysis of educational leadership. Phenomenology is particularly suited for understanding and describing human experiences as perceived by those who have lived them. Moustakas (1994) describes phenomenology as "a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience" (p. 13). This emphasis on essence makes phenomenology the ideal methodology for examining the shared and individual realities of Black male principals in leadership. However, because leadership experiences are lived and interpreted within complex social, cultural, and racialized contexts, this study also draws upon van Manen's (1990) phenomenology of practice, which emphasizes the contextual meaning of lived experiences and the interpretive nature of human understanding. Together, these complementary perspectives provide a methodological foundation for exploring the common themes among Black male principals and the situated meanings they ascribe to navigating systemic inequities while sustaining academic success. Qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, emphasizing participants' perspectives and the contextual factors

influencing their experiences. Creswell and Poth (2017) note that qualitative methods enable researchers to explore “the complexity of the situation and the personal, lived experiences of individuals” (p. 45). By employing phenomenology, this study focused on uncovering the essence of Black male principals’ experiences, illuminating how they sustain leadership roles and foster academic improvement while navigating systemic barriers.

The phenomenological approach was chosen for its ability to address the study’s research questions, which focus on the challenges, motivations, practices, and systemic supports shaping the leadership experiences of Black male principals. Phenomenology allows the researcher to delve deeply into participants’ reflections, capturing the complexity of their lived realities. The choice of phenomenology is justified by its ability to:

1. **Center Participants’ Lived Experiences:** By prioritizing the voices of Black male principals, this approach ensures that the study authentically represents their perspectives, challenges, and achievements.
2. **Capture Contextual Complexities:** Phenomenology’s focus on individual and shared meanings enables an in-depth exploration of leadership within the cultural and systemic context of urban education.
3. **Facilitate Meaning-Making:** This methodology aligns with the study’s focus on how participants interpret and ascribe meaning to their experiences, particularly in relation to systemic inequities and leadership strategies.

Quantitative methods, which focus on numerical data and generalizability, would not sufficiently capture the depth and richness of these narratives. Likewise, mixed methods approaches, although comprehensive, risk diluting the focus on lived experiences by emphasizing breadth over depth. Therefore, a phenomenological approach is particularly suited to meeting the study’s

objectives. To ensure methodological rigor, the study incorporates key phenomenological techniques as outlined by Moustakas (1994):

- Epoche (Bracketing): The researcher set aside personal biases and preconceptions by maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the study. This ensured that participants' experiences were examined authentically, without undue influence from the researcher's perspective.
- Horizontalization: During data analysis, all participant statements were initially treated with equal value, allowing themes to emerge organically and reducing the risk of researcher bias.
- Imaginative Variation: This process was employed to identify the structural elements of participants' experiences, providing a deeper understanding of how systemic and contextual factors shape their realities.

This study's research design is closely aligned with its theoretical frameworks, which provide both a lens for understanding the research problem and a foundation for interpreting the findings:

- Critical Race Theory (CRT):
 - CRT emphasizes the importance of amplifying marginalized voices and challenging systemic inequities. The phenomenological approach aligns with CRT by centering the counter-narratives of Black male principals, providing insights into how they navigate and challenge systemic barriers in education.
 - This study draws on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the racialized experiences of Black male principals in urban schools. Ladson-Billings (2000) highlights how dominant epistemologies often marginalize the voices of educators

of color, reinforcing the need for research that prioritizes counter-narratives and racially conscious methodologies

- Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL):
 - CRSL informs the study's exploration of leadership practices that affirm and celebrate students' and communities' cultural identities. Phenomenology enables an in-depth examination of how participants implement CRSL principles in their schools.
- Resilience Theory:
 - Resilience Theory highlights the personal and systemic factors that enable individuals to overcome adversity. By focusing on lived experiences, phenomenology uncovers the strategies and supports that sustain Black male principals in challenging environments.
- Transformational Leadership:
 - Transformational Leadership provides insights into how participants inspire change and foster academic success. The phenomenological approach captures the essence of these leadership practices and their perceived impact on students and communities.

By integrating these frameworks into the research design, the study ensures that participants' lived experiences are examined within a broader theoretical and systemic context. While phenomenology offers significant strengths, it is not without limitations. Potential challenges include:

- **Subjectivity:** The reliance on participants' narratives and the researcher's interpretation introduces the possibility of bias. To address this, the researcher engaged in reflexivity through journaling and member checking.
- **Data Saturation:** Ensuring saturation in phenomenological research can be challenging due to the depth of inquiry. This study addressed this by including a sufficient sample size (8 participants) and triangulating data through interviews and document analysis.

Acknowledging and addressing these limitations ensures that the study maintains methodological rigor while capturing the depth and richness of participants' experiences.

The qualitative phenomenological approach provides a robust framework for exploring the lived experiences of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools. By centering participants' voices, capturing contextual complexities, and integrating theoretical frameworks, the research design ensures a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of leadership in these settings. This design was operationalized through rigorous data collection and analysis methods, as described in the following sections.

Participant Selection

This study focused on Black male principals in urban Midwestern public and private schools serving predominantly students of color. These leaders offer unique perspectives on leadership practices that support academic improvement in environments shaped by systemic inequities. To gather rich and relevant insights, purposive sampling was used. This approach allowed for the intentional selection of participants who met specific inclusion criteria aligned with the research questions (Patton, 2015).

Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- **Demographic and Professional Identity:** Black male principals or assistant principals.

- Experience: A minimum of two - three years of tenure in their current leadership role, reflecting sustained leadership in their schools.
- Context: Leadership in urban Midwestern schools with a majority population of Black or Latino students.
- Impact: Evidence of sustained academic improvement during their tenure, identified through self-reports corroborated by publicly available performance data (e.g., standardized test scores, graduation rates) or district-level recognition.

These criteria ensured that participants had the depth of experience and contextual relevance necessary to provide meaningful data for the study.

Sampling Strategy

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy, which is particularly suited to qualitative phenomenological research. This method prioritizes selecting participants who can offer detailed, reflective accounts of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Additionally, snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants through recommendations from initial recruits. This approach ensured the recruitment of a diverse and relevant sample while maintaining the study's focus on depth and richness of data.

Recruitment Procedures

Participants were recruited using a multi-faceted approach designed to access a diverse range of Black male principals while addressing potential recruitment challenges:

1. Professional Networks: Leveraged existing connections with educational organizations, district administrators, and professional associations that support Black school leaders.

This approach capitalized on established trust and relationships, increasing the likelihood of participation.

2. Targeted Outreach: Personalized invitation letters were sent to potential participants, clearly outlining the study's purpose, inclusion criteria, and the voluntary nature of their involvement.
3. Community Engagement: Collaborated with community organizations and stakeholders to identify eligible participants who may not be accessible through traditional professional channels.
4. Snowball Sampling: Encouraged participants to recommend colleagues who meet the inclusion criteria, broadening the recruitment pool and ensuring diversity within the sample.

Addressing Recruitment Challenges

Given the demanding roles of Black male principals, potential recruitment challenges include limited availability and reluctance to participate due to time constraints. To mitigate these challenges:

- The researcher offered flexible scheduling options to accommodate participants' work and other commitments.
- The researcher emphasized the significance of their contributions to advancing educational leadership scholarship and improving understanding of systemic inequities.

Sample Size

The study included 8 participants, consistent with recommendations for phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). This sample size is designed to balance depth and breadth, ensuring sufficient data to achieve saturation while allowing for detailed exploration of each participant's experiences.

Rationale for Sample Size:

- **Data Saturation:** A sample size of 8 participants ensures themes and patterns can emerge without compromising the depth of analysis.
- **Feasibility:** This range is manageable given the time-intensive nature of data collection methods, which include interviews and document analysis.
- **Diversity of Perspectives:** Including participants from various urban districts in the Midwest enhances the transferability of findings, providing a nuanced understanding of shared and unique experiences.

Ethical Considerations in Recruitment

The recruitment process adhered to ethical guidelines to protect participants' rights and well-being:

1. **Informed Consent:** Participants received a detailed consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and confidentiality measures. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.
2. **Confidentiality:** Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data was securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.
3. **Transparency:** Participants were encouraged to ask questions about the study, ensuring they were fully informed before agreeing to participate.

The participant selection process was carefully designed to ensure the study captured the voices of Black male principals with sustained leadership experience in urban Midwestern schools. By employing purposive and snowball sampling strategies, addressing potential recruitment challenges, and adhering to ethical standards, the study maintained methodological rigor and relevance. The next section outlines the data collection methods used to gather rich, nuanced narratives from participants.

Data Collection Methods

To explore the lived experiences of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological methodology. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. This approach ensured methodological rigor through triangulation, providing a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Primary Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method for data collection, allowing participants to share their experiences in their own words while providing flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes (Patton, 2015).

- Purpose: To capture participants' personal narratives, insights into systemic challenges, and reflections on their leadership practices and motivations.
- Format: Interviews were guided by open-ended questions aligned with the research questions and theoretical frameworks. This approach ensured participants can elaborate on their lived experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews.
- Sample Questions:
 1. Can you describe a significant challenge you have faced as a principal and how you addressed it?
 2. What factors motivate you to remain in your leadership role despite systemic challenges?
 3. How do you integrate culturally responsive leadership practices into your daily work?

4. What supports, either systemic or personal, have been most instrumental in sustaining your leadership?
 - Duration and Logistics: Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted either in person or virtually, depending on participants’ preferences. Audio recordings, with participants’ consent, ensured accurate transcription and analysis.

Supplementary Data Collection Methods

Document analysis was used to supplement the interview, providing additional insights into participants’ leadership practices and their schools’ priorities.

- Purpose: To examine the systemic and institutional context in which participants operate, as reflected in documents such as school improvement plans, meeting agendas, and professional development materials.
- Selection Criteria: Relevant documents were identified during interviews and must directly relate to participants’ leadership roles or school contexts.
- Process: The researcher analyzed documents for evidence of leadership strategies, systemic supports, and culturally responsive priorities. For example, a professional development agenda may reveal strategies for addressing equity challenges.

Data Collection Tools

To ensure consistency and rigor, the following tools were used:

1. Interview Guide: A semi-structured interview guide included open-ended questions aligned with the research questions and theoretical frameworks. Prompts encouraged deeper reflections.
2. Document Analysis Checklist: A checklist to ensure all documents meet the inclusion criteria and are relevant to the research questions.

Pilot Testing of Tools

Before full-scale data collection began, the researcher conducted a pilot test of the interview guide with a small sample of educators. This ensured clarity and relevance of interview questions and alignment of tools with the study's purpose and goals.

Ethical Considerations in Data Collection for the Pilot Testing

Ethical safeguards were in place throughout the data collection process to protect participants' rights and ensure the integrity of the study:

1. **Informed Consent:** Participants were provided written consent before data collection began. They were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time without penalty.
2. **Confidentiality:** Data was anonymized using pseudonyms, and all recordings, transcripts, and interview notes were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.
3. **Sensitivity in Addressing Racialized Experiences:** Given the study's focus on Black male principals, the researcher approached sensitive topics with care, ensuring participants felt comfortable and respected during interviews and document analysis.

Triangulation

The combination of interviews and document analysis ensured triangulation, which strengthened the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Patton, 2015). Each method complements the others, providing a holistic understanding of participants' experiences and minimizing potential biases. This approach to data collection was designed to capture the depth and richness of Black male principals' lived experiences. By integrating interviews and document analysis, the study ensured a comprehensive exploration of the research questions. The

next section outlines the data analysis methods used to identify themes and patterns in the collected data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process in this study was designed to uncover patterns, themes, and the essence of Black male principals' lived experiences in urban Midwestern schools. Aligned with the phenomenological methodology, the analysis emphasized participant narratives and their contextual meanings, employing thematic analysis to identify significant insights. Informed by van Manen's (1990) notion of phenomenology of practice, the analytic process also attended to the contextual realities shaping participants' leadership experiences.

Preparation of Data

- **Transcription:** Audio recordings from interviews were transcribed verbatim to capture the depth and nuance of participants' responses. Document analysis findings were also systematically organized.
- **Data Familiarization:** The researcher engaged in repeated readings of transcripts, interview notes, and documents to immerse in the data and identify initial impressions and recurring ideas.

Coding Process

Coding serves as the bridge between raw data and emerging themes, following an iterative and interpretive process (Saldana, 2016). A two-cycle coding approach was employed:

- **First Cycle Coding:**
 - *Descriptive Coding:* Summarizes data in short phrases to capture the essence of participants' statements.
 - *In Vivo Coding:* Uses participants' own words as codes to maintain the authenticity of their narratives and center their voices.

- Second Cycle Coding:
 - *Pattern Coding*: Groups descriptive and in vivo codes into broader categories, identifying recurring themes or patterns in the data.
 - *Thematic Development*: Synthesizes patterns into themes that align with the research questions and theoretical frameworks, providing deeper insights into participants' experiences.

For example, the in vivo code “*fighting for respect*” might be grouped with other codes such as “*addressing stereotypes*” and “*proving worth*” under the broader pattern “*navigating systemic bias.*” This pattern would later develop into the theme “*Overcoming Marginalization.*”

Thematic Analysis

Once themes were identified, the researcher employed thematic analysis to interpret their meanings and connections:

- **Horizontalization**: Each data point was initially treated with equal weight, ensuring no perspective is overlooked (Moustakas, 1994).
- **Imaginative Variation**: Themes were examined from multiple perspectives to identify structural elements influencing participants' experiences.
- **Essence Identification**: The final step involved synthesizing themes to capture the essence of Black male principals' leadership journeys.

The identified themes were interpreted through the study's theoretical frameworks:

1. **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**: Guided the identification of systemic barriers and participants' counter-narratives.
2. **Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)**: Informed the exploration of leadership practices that affirm cultural identities and foster student success.

3. Resilience Theory: Framed the analysis of strategies that sustain participants' leadership amidst challenges.
4. Transformational Leadership: Provided insights into how participants inspire change and achieve systemic impact.

Use of Qualitative Data Analysis Tools

To enhance organization and rigor, Excel spreadsheets were used to manage and analyze qualitative data. Specifically:

- **Efficient Coding:** Excel facilitated the systematic coding of transcripts, interview notes, and documents. Descriptive and in vivo codes were organized in tables, ensuring that all data segments were categorized accurately and consistently.
- **Organization and Visualization:** Excel supported the creation of matrices, charts, and tables that helped identify patterns, track frequencies, and display relationships across the data.
- **Retrieval and Querying:** The structured spreadsheet design allowed for efficient retrieval of coded segments, comparison across participants, and refinement of themes in alignment with phenomenological analysis.

While NVivo and other qualitative software platforms offer extensive features for managing large and complex datasets, this study included a sample of 8 participants. Given this scope, Excel spreadsheets provided sufficient functionality for systematic coding, organizing descriptive and in vivo codes, and developing themes. Excel's flexibility allowed the researcher to build coding tables, track horizontalization, and maintain an audit trail without the added complexity of specialized software. This approach ensured methodological rigor while staying

aligned with the transcendental phenomenological process (Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2016; Woods et al., 2016).

Before full-scale analysis began, the researcher conducted a pilot test of the coding process using one or two interview transcripts. This pilot test:

- Refined the coding approach to ensure clarity and consistency.
- Identified potential challenges in the coding or thematic development process.
- Confirmed alignment of the coding process with the research questions and theoretical frameworks.

Ethical safeguards were upheld during analysis to protect participants' confidentiality and the integrity of the data:

1. Anonymization: All participant data was anonymized during analysis, with pseudonyms used in reporting findings.
2. Secure Data Storage: Transcripts, notes, and coded data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher.

The data analysis process in this study is methodologically rigorous, ensuring that the voices and experiences of Black male principals are authentically represented. By employing a multi-step coding process, thematic analysis, and integration of theoretical frameworks, the study captures the depth and essence of participants' lived experiences. With these strategies in place, the next section addresses the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the study's findings.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Ensuring trustworthiness and credibility is essential in qualitative research, particularly in phenomenological studies that seek to authentically represent participants' lived experiences.

This study employed strategies to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy and authenticity of the findings, ensuring they reflect participants' experiences. This study employed the following strategies to enhance credibility:

- **Triangulation:** Data from semi-structured interviews and document analysis were cross-referenced to verify findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences (Patton, 2015). For example, a review of the leadership practices meeting agenda during meetings would corroborate participants' descriptions of those practices in interviews.
- **Member Checking:** Participants were invited to review preliminary findings and interpretations, ensuring that their narratives were accurately represented. For instance, participants received a summary of key themes and were asked to confirm or refine interpretations based on their lived experiences.
- **Prolonged Engagement:** The researcher spent significant time with participants during interviews to build trust and gain a deeper understanding of their contexts.
- **Peer Debriefing:** Peers familiar with qualitative research reviewed coding, provided feedback on emerging themes, and challenged interpretations to ensure findings are grounded in the data rather than researcher assumptions.

Transferability

Transferability ensured that the study's findings could resonate with or be applied to similar contexts. To enhance transferability:

- **Thick Description:** Detailed accounts of participants' experiences, school demographics, district policies, and leadership contexts were provided. This level of detail enabled readers to assess whether findings are applicable to other settings.
- **Diverse Sample:** Including Black male principals from various urban Midwestern schools ensured a range of perspectives, increasing the potential for transferability. For instance, participants from schools with different socioeconomic profiles provided insights into varied leadership contexts.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the study's findings over time and across conditions.

This was ensured through:

- **Audit Trail:** A comprehensive record of methodological decisions, coding processes, and analytical reflections was maintained to provide transparency. The audit trail documented key decisions, including changes to the coding process and adjustments based on peer feedback.
- **Reflexive Journaling:** The researcher documented personal biases, assumptions, and changes in perspective throughout the study, ensuring that these factors are accounted for in the analysis. Prompts in the reflexive journal included questions such as:
 - *What assumptions am I bringing to this analysis?*
 - *How might my personal experiences as a Black male leader influence my interpretation of the data?*
 - *What alternative perspectives could be considered?*

Confirmability

Confirmability ensured that the findings are shaped by participants' voices rather than researcher bias. Strategies include:

- Reflexivity: The researcher actively reflected on personal biases and their influence on the research process, using a reflexive journal to document and mitigate these biases.
- Data Triangulation: The integration of multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, and documents) minimized the influence of any single source or perspective.
- Audit Trail: Detailed documentation of data collection, coding, and theme development allowed for external review and verification.

Addressing Researcher Bias

Given the researcher's positionality as a Black male leader in education, there was potential for both insight and bias. Strategies that addressed these dynamics include:

- Reflexive Practice: The researcher utilized journaling to acknowledge and bracket personal experiences, ensuring they did not overshadow participants' narratives.
- Collaboration with Peers: Peer debriefing helped identify and mitigate potential biases in data interpretation and theme development.
- Member Checking: Participants' feedback on preliminary findings served as a safeguard against misrepresentation.

Ethical Considerations

Adhering to ethical principles is a cornerstone of qualitative research, particularly in studies addressing sensitive topics like the lived experiences of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools. This section outlines the ethical safeguards implemented throughout the

research process to ensure participant protection, data integrity, and compliance with institutional and professional standards.

Informed Consent

Participants received a detailed informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. The form ensured that participation is voluntary and emphasized the right to:

- Withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- Decline to answer any interview questions or participate in specific aspects of the research.
- Request clarification on any aspect of the study at any stage.

The consent process also included:

- An overview of how data would be used and stored.
- Assurance that participation poses minimal risk and offers the potential benefit of contributing to scholarship on educational leadership.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

To protect participants' identities and ensure confidentiality:

- Pseudonyms: Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and any identifying details (e.g., school names or districts) were generalized or removed from the findings.
- Data Security: All audio recordings, transcripts, interview notes, and analyzed data were stored in password-protected digital files and encrypted storage devices. Hard copies, if any, were kept in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher.

- **Data Retention and Destruction:** Data will be retained for three years following the study's completion, in accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, and securely destroyed thereafter.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

Before commencing data collection, the study underwent a thorough review by the IRB to ensure compliance with ethical standards. The IRB approval process involved:

- Submission of the research proposal, including the informed consent form, recruitment materials, and data collection instruments.
- Addressing any concerns or revisions suggested by the IRB to enhance participant protection and data confidentiality.
- Obtaining an official IRB approval letter, which is included as an appendix in the dissertation.

The researcher proactively addressed any feedback or revisions suggested by the IRB, ensuring that all ethical considerations met institutional and professional standards. Given the study's focus on Black male principals, special care was taken to address the potentially sensitive nature of racialized experiences. The researcher did the following:

- Fostered a safe and respectful environment during interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences without fear of judgment or retribution.
- Used reflexivity to remain aware of personal biases and assumptions, ensuring they do not influence the interpretation of participants' narratives.
- Gave the participants the opportunity to review and revise their interview transcripts to ensure their perspectives are accurately represented.

If a participant became emotional during an interview, the researcher paused the session, offered support, and provided the option to resume or withdraw. Interview settings were designed to foster comfort and trust, which allowed participants to choose the time and location for interviews.

Mitigating Power Dynamics

The researcher acknowledged and addressed potential power dynamics that may arise due to shared identities or professional roles. Strategies include:

- Maintaining an empathetic but neutral stance during interviews and document analysis, encouraging participants to lead the conversation.
- Affirming participants' agency in shaping the research process by emphasizing their central role in generating insights.
- Using member checking to validate interpretations and ensure findings reflect participants' intended meanings.

Highlighting Ethical Challenges

One potential ethical challenge is participants' reluctance to discuss sensitive topics, such as systemic racism or leadership struggles. The researcher addressed this by:

- Building rapport with participants before data collection begins.
- Emphasizing confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation.
- Reassuring participants of their right to skip questions or withdraw from the study at any time.

Publication and Dissemination of Findings

To ensure transparency and accountability, participants were informed of how the study's findings would be shared. The researcher did the following:

- Disseminated results through academic publications, conferences, and professional presentations.
- Provided participants with a summary of the study's findings, written in accessible language, upon request.
- Avoided sharing any identifying information in public reports or presentations.

By adhering to ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to participants' experiences, this study ensured the protection of participant rights and the integrity of the research process. With ethical safeguards firmly in place, the next section discusses the study's limitations and delimitations, offering a reflective account of its scope and potential constraints.

Limitations of the Study

Every research study is subject to limitations that may impact its scope, methodology, and findings. Acknowledging these limitations enhances the transparency and integrity of the research. This section outlines the key methodological and contextual constraints of this study and discusses strategies employed to mitigate their effects.

Methodological Limitations

- Sample Size and Generalizability
 - Limitation: The study's purposive sample of 8 Black male principals was consistent with qualitative phenomenological methodology but limited the generalizability of findings to broader populations.
 - Mitigation: The study's emphasis on rich, thick description ensured that findings provided meaningful insights applicable to similar contexts, even if they were not statistically generalizable.

- Dependence on Self-Reported Data
 - Limitation: Self-reported data from interviews may be influenced by participants' memory, perception, or social desirability bias.
 - Mitigation: Triangulation with the document analysis data helped validate participants' accounts, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.
- Researcher Bias
 - Limitation: As a Black male leader in education, the researcher's shared identity and professional background may have introduced bias in data interpretation.
 - Mitigation: Reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking were employed to mitigate bias and ensure that findings remain grounded in participants' voices.

Contextual Limitations

- Geographical Scope
 - Limitation: The study focused exclusively on Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools, which limits the applicability of findings to other regions or contexts, such as rural or suburban schools.
 - Mitigation: The inclusion of participants from diverse urban districts within the Midwest enhances the breadth of perspectives captured, allowing for more nuanced findings. However, findings were interpreted within the context of urban Midwestern schools.
- Time Constraints

- Limitation: The limited duration of data collection restricted the ability to capture long-term leadership practices and systemic changes.
- Mitigation: Document analysis was conducted across multiple sessions and time points to capture a broader picture of participants' leadership contexts.
- Sensitivity of Topic
 - Limitation: Discussing systemic barriers and racialized experiences may have caused discomfort or hesitation among participants, potentially affecting the depth of their responses.
 - Mitigation: To mitigate this, the researcher created a supportive interview environment by emphasizing confidentiality, allowing participants to skip questions, and using open-ended prompts to guide the discussion.
- Uncontrollable External Factors
 - Limitation: External factors, such as participants' time constraints or unexpected school-related events, may have impacted the depth and breadth of data collection.
 - Mitigation: The researcher offered flexible scheduling and adapted data collection plans as needed to accommodate participants' availability.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher's identity as a Black male educator with experience in similar contexts presents both strengths and challenges:

- Strength: Shared identity may have fostered trust and rapport with participants, encouraging openness in their narratives. This dynamic enhanced the authenticity and richness of the data collected.

- Challenge: Personal experiences may have unconsciously shaped data interpretation or the framing of questions.
- Mitigation: Reflexive practice and peer review ensured that the researcher critically examined their influence on the research process.

This shared identity presented both strengths and challenges. On one hand, it facilitated rapport and trust, encouraging openness in participants' narratives. On the other hand, it required intentional strategies to ensure that my own experiences did not influence the analysis. Reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking were systematically employed to mitigate potential bias and ensure participants' voices remained central.

Acknowledging the role of racialized discourse in qualitative inquiry, as described by Ladson-Billings (2000), the researcher employs reflexive journaling to examine how personal experiences as a Black male educator may influence data interpretation. While these limitations present constraints, the study's design, including methodological rigor and strategies to mitigate bias, ensures the integrity and reliability of the findings. By acknowledging these limitations, the study contributes to a transparent and thoughtful exploration of the lived experiences of Black male principals. The following section concludes the methodology chapter, summarizing its key elements and transitioning to the findings chapter.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the research methodology designed to explore the lived experiences of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools. By employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study captured the depth and essence of participants' leadership journeys, focusing on their challenges, motivations, and practices.

The methodology chapter provides a robust framework for exploring the research questions and capturing the voices of Black male principals. The carefully designed research methods, trustworthiness strategies, and ethical safeguards ensure the study's integrity and depth. The findings chapter presents key themes that emerged from the data, shedding light on the systemic challenges, leadership practices, and supports that shape the experiences of Black male principals in urban schools. These insights aim to contribute to the broader discourse on educational leadership and equity.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this phenomenological study, which explored the lived experiences of Black male principals who sustained leadership for more than 3 years in urban Midwestern schools serving predominantly students of color. As articulated in Chapter 1, the overarching research question guiding this study was: *What are the lived experiences of Black male principals who sustain leadership for more than three years in urban Midwestern school settings with predominantly students of color, and how do they achieve and maintain academic improvement during their tenure?* To deepen this inquiry, four sub-questions directed the analysis:

1. Challenges and Barriers: What systemic challenges and barriers do Black male principals encounter in urban school settings?
2. Motivation and Retention: What factors influence Black male principals to remain in their leadership roles beyond three years?
3. Leadership Practices and Impact: How do culturally responsive leadership practices contribute to the academic and social success of students in schools led by Black male principals?
4. Systemic Supports: What systemic supports (e.g., mentorship, policy changes, or community engagement) are essential for sustaining Black male principals in urban educational settings?

These questions reflect the study's commitment to document the challenges faced by Black male principals and to highlight the strategies and commitments that sustain them. As established in Chapter 2, the study was grounded in four theoretical frameworks: Critical Race Theory (CRT), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), Resilience Theory, and

Transformational Leadership that collectively situate the findings within a robust scholarly conversation. Chapter 3 outlined the methodological commitments of a qualitative phenomenological approach. This chapter builds from that foundation, offering a rigorous presentation of findings grounded in participants' voices, organized into emergent themes, and distilled into a phenomenological essence statement.

The methodological foundation of this study is phenomenology, which seeks to describe and interpret the essence of lived experience. Moustakas (1994) defines phenomenology as “a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (p. 13). This orientation shaped the analytic process in two important ways. First, participants' descriptions were treated as authoritative accounts of experience; the role of the researcher was to engage in *epoche* (bracketing) to set aside presuppositions and privilege the voices of participants. Second, analysis proceeded through horizontalization, in which all meaning units were initially given equal weight before being synthesized into thematic structures that reveal both the commonalities and contextual differences in participants' leadership experiences. This phenomenological stance ensured that findings are not simply a catalog of codes, but a distillation of meaning grounded in the lived realities of participants.

Overview of the Analytic Process

Table 4.1

Coding Audit Trail Snapshot

Participant	Times tamp	Transcript Excerpt	In Vivo Code(s)	Pattern Code	Category	Emerging Theme	Decision Note
David (P1)	0:16	So, prior to becoming principal...	traditionally a math teacher; STEM dean	Leadership as natural progression	Adult Belief Systems	Resisting Deficit Ideologies	Coded 9/13/25
David (P1)	9:15	Penalizing kids for things they had zero control over... Biggest challenge? Adults didn't believe our kids could achieve...	penalizing kids; inequitable constant outcome	Equity and discipline reframing	Equity/Discipline	Resisting Deficit Ideologies	Coded 9/13/25
Marcus (P2)	14:22	Faith sustains me... prayer and gospel music help...	adults didn't believe our kids	Adult deficit mindsets	Deficit Resistance	Resisting Deficit Ideologies	Coded 9/14/25
Anthony (P3)	21:40	help...	faith sustains; prayer; gospel music	Faith as resilience practice	Sustainability	Sustaining Amid Isolation	Coded 9/15/25

The analytic process followed a two-cycle coding strategy consistent with Saldaña (2016), while remaining grounded in phenomenological commitments. Saldaña emphasizes that coding is “a heuristic—a method of discovery” (p. 9), and this perspective guided the iterative movement from raw transcripts to interpretive themes.

First-cycle coding preserved participants' words. Each transcript was coded line by line using in vivo codes. Participants' own words so that the language of the principals themselves remained at the forefront of analysis. On average, 12–15 in vivo codes were generated per

transcript, capturing a density of meaning across narratives. This cycle ensured that participants' voices were not prematurely abstracted into researcher-driven categories. Consistent with phenomenology, horizontalization was applied so that each meaning unit was initially treated with equal significance (Moustakas, 1994). Because phenomenology privileges lived language, I preserved in vivo codes as the backbone of meaning-making. Reflexive memos were written after coding each transcript, serving as bracketing exercises to note where my positionality as a Black male leader in education resonated with or diverged from participants' accounts.

Table 4.2

In Vivo Code Density by Participant

Participant (Pseudonym & P#)	# In Vivo Codes	Avg Codes per 10 min	Notes on Saturation
David (P1)	65	14	Dense coding; multiple equity references
Marcus (P2)	52	12	Strong emphasis on adult barriers
Anthony (P3)	48	11	Faith-related codes unique
James (P4)	60	13	Accountability pressures emphasized
Christopher (P5)	55	12	Legacy orientation; alumni
Jerome (P6)	50	11	Instructional credibility strong
Lawrence (P7)	62	14	Isolation language frequent
Terrence (P8)	57	13	High emphasis on moral purpose

Second-cycle coding clustered those words into pattern codes. In the second cycle, in vivo codes were clustered into pattern codes, which Saldaña (2016) describes as explanatory or inferential codes that identify emergent constructs. Within each case, these pattern codes provided coherence and reduced analytic complexity. Subsequently, cross-case comparisons were conducted to develop broader categories, such as *Adult Belief Systems as Barriers*, *Representation and Identity Work*, *Community and Family Engagement*, *Culturally Responsive Daily Practices*, *Sustainability and Resilience*, *Conflict as Struggle*, and *Moral Purpose and*

Legacy. These categories served as analytic bridges, moving from the descriptive level of in vivo coding to the interpretive level of theme development.

Table 4.3

Pattern Code → Category Roll-Up

Pattern Code	Representative In Vivo Phrases	Category	Participants Contributing
Credibility gap	hoops and extra pieces	Adult Belief Systems	David (P1), Jerome (P6)
Adult deficit mindsets	adults didn't believe our kids	Adult Belief Systems	Marcus (P2), Terrence (P8)
Alumni as success	alum came back doing the thing	Community/Family Engagement	David (P1), Christopher (P5)
Affinity groups	space that's safe; not alone	Sustainability/Resilience	David (P1), Lawrence (P7)
Spiritual calling	prayer and gospel music	Sustainability/Resilience	Anthony (P3), Christopher (P5)
Accountability critique	Grow the DPI report card score... but there's got to be more	Systemic Barriers	James (P4)

Figure 4.1

Data Structure Diagram (In Vivo Codes → Pattern Codes → Themes)

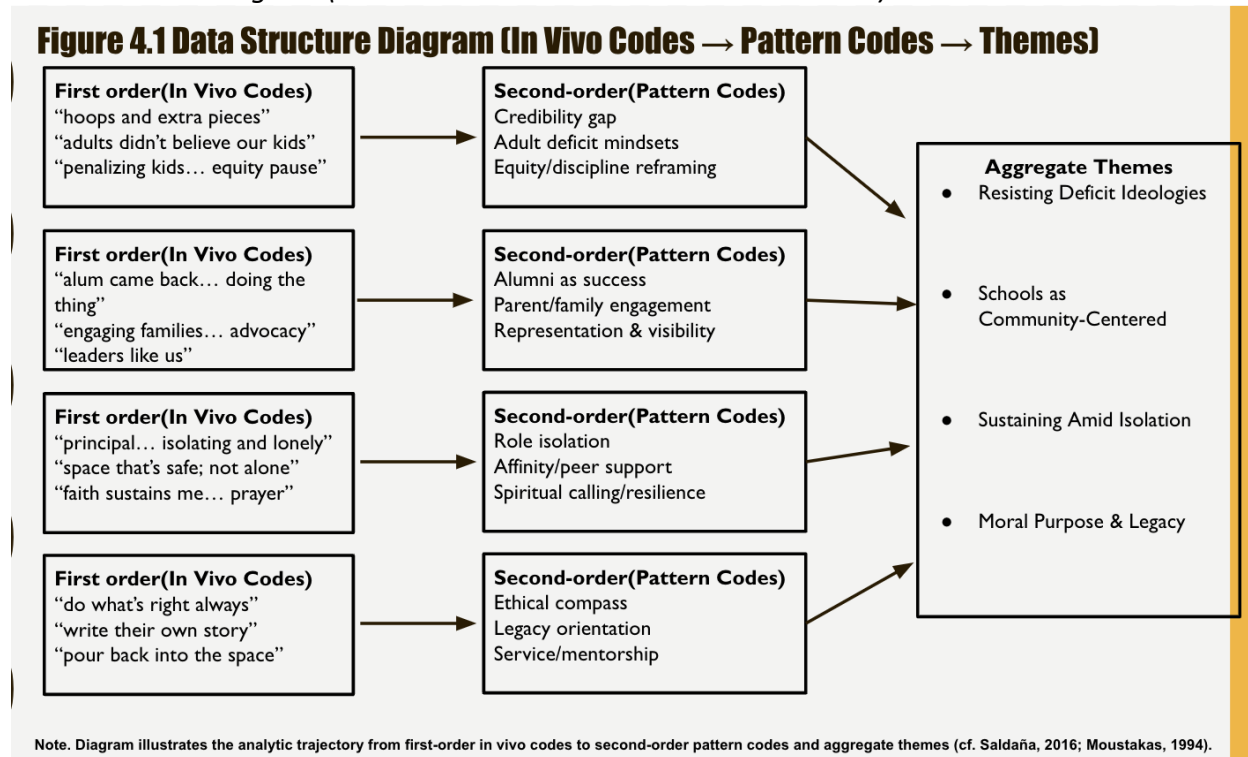


Figure 4.1. Data Structure Diagram (In Vivo Codes → Pattern Codes → Themes). Note. Diagram illustrates the analytic trajectory from first-order in vivo codes to second-order pattern codes and aggregate themes (cf. Saldaña, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Through iterative review of categories, four overarching themes were identified as representing the shared essence of participants’ experiences: (1) *Resisting Adult Deficit Beliefs and Stereotypes*; (2) *Building Schools as Community-Centered Spaces*; (3) *Sustaining Leadership in Isolation and Struggle*; and (4) *Leading with Moral Purpose and Legacy*. Each theme represents both convergence across participants and meaningful variation in emphasis, together offering a holistic portrait of sustained leadership among Black male principals.

The analytic process culminated in the development of a phenomenological essence statement, synthesizing the themes into a concise description of the phenomenon. As Moustakas

(1994) explains, the "essence" is the unchangeable structure of an experience. It's the central meaning that persists, regardless of individual differences. In this study, the essence reflects leadership as a constant negotiation: resisting deficit narratives, cultivating community, sustaining oneself amid struggle, and orienting leadership toward justice and legacy.

To ensure analytic rigor, several safeguards were integrated into the process. First, an audit trail was maintained in Excel, with separate tabs documenting raw in vivo codes, pattern codes per participant, cross-case categories, emergent themes, and decision memos. Each analytic decision was date-stamped, ensuring transparency and enabling external review. Second, reflexivity was practiced consistently through journaling, which documented both potential biases and shifts in perspective during analysis. Third, triangulation was achieved by incorporating supplementary artifacts (e.g., awards, school improvement plans), which were uneven across participants but nonetheless provided an additional layer of confirmation or complication to interview data. Fourth, member checking was offered through transcript reviews and summary findings, allowing participants to affirm or clarify the accuracy of the representation. Together, these strategies enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 4.4

Triangulation Artifacts Map

Participant (Pseudonym & P#)	Artifact Type	Date	What It Corroborates	Evidence Note
David (P1)	School Improvement Plan	2022	Accountability critique → broader vision of success	Document emphasized whole- child metrics alongside DPI Notes show emphasis on
Marcus (P2)	Parent Meeting Agenda	2023	Community-centered leadership	advocacy and family partnership

Anthony (P3)	National Teacher of the Year award	2021	Instructional credibility & resilience	External recognition aligns with participant narrative
James (P4)	Professional Development Materials	2022	Deficit resistance in teacher practice	PD slides centered on high expectations
Christopher (P5)	DPI “Beating the Odds” Award Governor’s Service	2019	Legacy/impact	State recognition supports claim of sustained outcomes
Jerome (P6)	Recognition	2023	Representation & identity work	Honors principal’s role in equity-focused service
Lawrence (P7)	Leadership Team Notes	2022	Isolation & support practices	Notes show collaboration strategies in staff meetings
Terrence (P8)	Alumni Event Program	2023	Moral purpose & legacy	Event centered on alumni returning to mentor students

The remainder of this chapter is organized into five sections. First, participant profiles are presented to provide demographic and contextual background for each principal, ensuring that readers understand the settings in which participants’ experiences unfolded. Second, the chapter presents the emergent themes, with thick description and multiple illustrative quotes from across participants. Third, a cross-case synthesis highlights convergences and divergences in experiences, supported by a matrix of participants and themes. Fourth, the essence statement is presented as the phenomenological distillation of the data. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary and transition to Chapter 5, which interprets the findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks of CRT, CRSL, Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership.

In sum, this chapter provides a rigorous, phenomenologically grounded presentation of the findings. By centering participants’ voices through in vivo coding, organizing meaning through pattern codes and categories, and synthesizing findings into themes and an essence, the chapter illuminates the lived realities of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools. The analysis addresses the guiding research questions and contributes to broader scholarly

conversations on equity, resilience, and leadership. With these commitments in view, I now introduce the eight principals whose lived contexts give the findings their texture.”

Participant Profiles

P1 – David

David has served as a principal for 2-3 years in a mid-sized Midwestern city. His school enrolls approximately 600 students, the majority of whom identify as Black or Latino and qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Before entering administration, David taught mathematics and later became a STEM dean, roles he describes as central to his credibility with staff and students. David assumed the principalship after two white male leaders, an experience that shaped his reflections on legitimacy and authority. He recalls needing to “establish credibility” in ways that his predecessors did not. While his school’s state report card scores have consistently improved under his leadership, David emphasizes that academic metrics only partially capture his vision of success. He has introduced family advocacy nights, parent leadership committees, and student-centered initiatives aimed at identity affirmation. His leadership has been recognized with a district award for equity-focused school improvement.

P2 – Marcus

Marcus has been principal of an urban high school for five years, serving approximately 900 students, nearly all of whom are students of color. Located in a historically disinvested neighborhood, the school contends with systemic inequities, which Marcus directly names as challenges. He frequently describes the persistence of “deficit mindsets” among some adults who doubt student potential. Before assuming the principalship, Marcus taught English and served as an assistant principal. He is known for persistence, particularly in engaging families, even when turnout has been low. Marcus has spearheaded curricular reforms emphasizing culturally relevant

pedagogy and has elevated student voice in school governance. Within his district, Marcus is recognized for confronting disbelief directly, using both data and presence to shift adult expectations of students.

P3 – Anthony

Anthony has led his current middle school for four years. Serving approximately 500 students, 85% of whom are Black or Latino, the school sits in a neighborhood undergoing demographic and economic transition. Anthony began his career as a social studies teacher and later served as an instructional coach. Anthony highlights faith as a sustaining force, often referencing prayer and gospel music as grounding practices. He describes culturally responsive leadership not as an occasional activity but as daily work woven into routines, curriculum, and interactions. Anthony has built partnerships with community organizations to expand student opportunities beyond the classroom. His leadership earned him a regional award for advancing school–community collaboration, reflecting his focus on shared responsibility for student success.

P4 – James

James has served as a middle school principal for 3 years in one of the largest schools in his private school district, enrolling more than 1,200 students, over 90% of whom identify as students of color. He began as a science teacher before moving quickly into administration. James has spearheaded initiatives to develop leadership pipelines for teachers of color, with the aim of sustaining equity-focused change. He often reflects on the tension between external accountability pressures, such as raising state report card scores, and his broader goal of equipping students with lifelong skills. Family engagement is a central focus: James developed parent leadership committees and advocacy events designed to bring families into school

governance. Artifacts he provided included school improvement plans and meeting agendas which demonstrate his commitment to institutionalizing family and community engagement.

P5 – Christopher

Christopher is the most veteran participant, with more than a decade of service as principal of a public traditional elementary school enrolling 450 students, nearly all Black or Latino. Before moving into leadership, Christopher taught history and later worked as a dean. He frequently describes his leadership as a calling, rooted in faith and a sense of divine guidance. Christopher considers himself a trailblazer, recalling that he was the first Black principal in his district at the time of his appointment. Under his leadership, the school developed a reputation for strong college readiness outcomes. He has launched mentorship programs for students and staff alike, emphasizing the importance of developing future leaders. Christopher has received statewide recognition for equity and leadership, reinforcing his narrative of service and legacy-building.

P6 – Jerome

Jerome has been principal of a private K-8 school for two years, serving about 400 students, the majority of whom are Black or Latino. His professional background includes counseling and assistant principal roles, shaping his emphasis on social-emotional support. Jerome describes his leadership journey as forged in conflict and openly acknowledges the fragility of sustainability. He speaks candidly about burnout and the ongoing process of learning self-care. Still, he grounds his persistence in faith and peer networks. Jerome has implemented restorative justice practices, moving the school away from punitive models of discipline. He is known for creating safe spaces where both staff and students can engage in critical dialogue about race, equity, and justice.

P7 – Lawrence

Lawrence leads a comprehensive public middle school of nearly 1,500 students, 95% of whom are students of color, and has been principal there for eight years. With a professional background in special education, Lawrence emphasizes individualized support and instructional leadership. He reflects frequently on the isolation of Black male leadership and the absence of mentorship opportunities. Lawrence rejects being typecast as a disciplinarian, instead insisting on visibility as an instructional leader. He has established partnerships with local universities, creating pathways for students into higher education. Lawrence has presented at state conferences on culturally responsive instructional practices and is recognized for embedding student voice in decision-making.

P8 – Terrence

Terrence has served for six years as principal of a public 6–8 public school enrolling 700 students, primarily Black and Latino. Before leading the school, he worked as a classroom teacher and curriculum coordinator. Terrence places community engagement at the heart of his philosophy, often stating, “The school is theirs, not mine.” He emphasizes daily wellness practices such as running and prayer while acknowledging the challenges of burnout. Terrence has cultivated alumni and community partnerships to strengthen trust and broaden student opportunities. His leadership has been recognized with awards for innovative curriculum design, and he envisions his legacy as building future leaders within the community he serves.

Table 4.5

Participant Demographics, School Contexts, and Professional Background

Pseudonym (P#)	Years in Role	School Level	% Students of Color	School Type	Professional Background & Artifacts
---------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------	--------------------------------	--------------------	--

David (P1)	2–3 years	Elementary & Middle (K–8)	>75%	Public Charter	Math teacher, STEM dean, Burke Fellowship
Marcus (P2)	3–5 years	High School (9-12)	>75%	Public Charter	English teacher, TFA alum
Anthony (P3)	3–5 years	Middle School (6–8)	>75%	Public Charter	Social studies teacher, TFA alum, National Teacher of the Year, 40 Under 40, BES Fellow
James (P4)	3–5 years	Middle (6–8)	>75%	Private	Science teacher, TFA alum
Christopher (P5)	6+ years	Elementary (K–5)	51–75%	Public Traditional	History teacher, “Beating the Odds” Award, DPI recognition
Jerome (P6)	2–3 years	Elementary & Middle (K–8)	51–75%	Private	Counseling background, Governor’s Service Recognition
Lawrence (P7)	8 years	Middle (6–8)	51–75%	Public Traditional	Special education background, Presidential Award, 40 Under 40
Terrence (P8)	6+ years	Middle (6–8)	51–75%	Public Traditional	Teacher/curriculum coordinator, 40 Under 40

Having introduced the participants and outlined the analytic process, the next step is to show how the four overarching themes were distributed across cases. Table 4.6 provides a snapshot of the evidence base for each theme, including the number of participants who contributed, the distinct excerpts coded, and the pattern codes that supported theme development. This density table makes clear which themes were most universal across participants and which carried more nuanced or varied emphases. In presenting these themes, the goal is to demonstrate analytic rigor while also highlighting how the lived experiences of Black male principals converged in meaningful ways, while still leaving space for individual variation.

Emergent Themes

Table 4.6 shows the density of each of the themes identified through the interviews.

Table 4.6

Theme Evidence Density

Theme	# Participants Contributing	# Distinct Excerpts	# Unique Pattern Codes	Notes
Resisting Deficit Ideologies	8	42	10	Universal; James (P4) framed more through accountability
Schools as Community-Centered	8	37	9	Universal but varied strategies (formal vs relational)
Sustaining Amid Isolation	7	30	8	Nearly universal; Marcus (P2) and Christopher (P5) indirect
Moral Purpose & Legacy	8	40	9	Universal; spirituality stronger for Anthony (P3) & Christopher (P5)

As Table 4.6 indicates, all eight principals contributed to the theme of resisting adult deficit beliefs, underscoring its universality as a challenge and a central feature of their leadership narratives.

Theme 1: Resisting Adult Deficit Beliefs and Stereotypes

Across participants, one of the strongest patterns to emerge was the need to confront deficit thinking and racialized stereotypes projected by adults. Principals described these challenges as central to their leadership: adults underestimated students, questioned their own legitimacy, or confined them to narrow disciplinary roles. For the principals in this study, leading schools meant managing academics while resisting deficit views from others.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that credibility was not assumed but earned, especially when following white leaders. David (P1) described this directly: *“Establishing*

credibility... followed behind two white male leaders... move freely with autonomy... hoops and extra pieces.” His reflection illustrates how Black male principals often face additional barriers to legitimacy that white colleagues do not. Leadership authority was contested rather than conferred, requiring principals to demonstrate worth through added effort and visible presence. This aligns with Critical Race Theory’s assertion that racism is embedded in institutions and shapes who is seen as credible (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Principals also pushed against the disciplinarian stereotype that frequently accompanied their racial identity. Jerome (P6) reflected on his frustration with this perception: *“I wanted to be seen as the instructional leader, not just the guy handling discipline.”* His words highlight how identity and professional role were conflated in ways that limited how others perceived his leadership. Similar dynamics were noted by Lawrence (P7), who explained that principals of color needed safe spaces with peers precisely because daily leadership was shaped by racialized assumptions. These accounts reflect Santamaría and Santamaría’s (2012) discussion of “identity labor,” where leaders of color must continually resist reductive framings while claiming authority as instructional leaders.

Another aspect of deficit thinking appeared in the way student success was narrowly defined by external accountability measures. James (P4) noted the pressure: *“Grow the DPI report card score... but there’s got to be more.”* While James framed his frustration in terms of accountability metrics, his critique reflects a deeper racialized dynamic. Critical Race Theory reminds us that racism is not an occasional departure from fairness, but a systemic feature embedded within policies and practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). By insisting that “there’s got to be more,” James pointed to how accountability regimes themselves function as deficit frames, reducing students’ potential to narrow test-based measures. His stance exemplifies the

resistance described by CRT scholars, where leaders expose and challenge the institutionalized mechanisms that perpetuate inequity. His critique captures the tension of leading schools in accountability-driven systems where improvement is equated with test score growth. By insisting “there’s got to be more,” James resisted reducing students to metrics, instead envisioning broader forms of achievement such as community transformation, identity development, and resilience. James’ insistence was not just statements; it was evident in the professional development materials (Table 4.4) he provided which explicitly displayed high expectations rooted in asset-based language for staff.

David (P1) offered a complementary perspective when reflecting on family and alumni engagement. For him, rejecting the deficit views of students meant highlighting success stories: *“Seeing the successes... alum came back... doing the thing... shift in the community.”* His pride in alumni accomplishments reframed student trajectories as evidence of transformation rather than deficit. In phenomenological terms, his meaning-making centered on success in standardized data and in the lived realities of students who returned to contribute to their communities.

The resistance to deficit perspectives was both professional and personal. Leaders noted that racialized expectations shaped daily interactions. Lawrence (P7) described the unique isolation of being a principal of color: *“...principal is like this very particular space, and it’s very isolating and lonely.”* While not framed directly as a deficit view, his comment underscores how racialized perceptions contributed to feelings of scrutiny and exclusion. These experiences made resistance not just an educational task but a survival strategy.

From an analytic standpoint, this theme demonstrates what Saldaña (2016) identifies as pattern coding’s purpose: to surface rules and explanations that underlie recurring accounts.

Here, the “rule” evident across narratives was that adult deficit thinking about either students or principals was pervasive. The “explanation” was that Black male principals survived and sustained their leadership by resisting these assumptions. They used visibility, advocacy, instructional authority, and alumni success as tools of resistance.

As a Black male leader myself, I recognize strong resonances with these accounts. I, too, have encountered moments when credibility was not assumed or when my leadership was equated with discipline rather than instruction. In analyzing these transcripts, I bracketed my own experiences to ensure participants’ voices remained central. Still, my positionality sharpened my attention to the ways race shaped their narratives. The convergence of their stories with my own experience underscores the salience of deficit resistance as both leadership practice and lived reality.

This theme speaks directly to the study’s first sub-question: *What systemic challenges and barriers do Black male principals encounter in urban school settings?* The challenge most consistently described was about the adult teachers and leaders, and the systems that underestimated or constrained them. Principals didn’t describe students as a major challenge they faced. It also connects to the second sub-question: *What factors influence Black male principals to remain in their leadership roles beyond three years?* The act of resistance itself, paradoxically, became sustaining. While exhausting, resisting deficit beliefs reinforced leaders’ sense of purpose and affirmed their necessity in spaces where students were too often underestimated.

In sum, participants revealed that resisting deficit beliefs and stereotypes was not an occasional task but a daily feature of leadership. They resisted skepticism of their credibility, stereotypes that confined them to disciplinarians, and accountability regimes that reduced

students to scores. They reframed student potential through alumni successes and family engagement, positioning themselves as instructional leaders committed to possibility. Leadership here was managerial and resistant, expressed as resistance-as-advocacy, resistance-as-survival, and resistance-as-hope.

Resisting deficit beliefs was not only a matter of individual conviction; it also compelled principals to redefine what schools could be. By refusing to accept narrow views of students as incapable or themselves as merely disciplinarians, participants sought to demonstrate alternative narratives through the very communities they served. The act of resistance naturally evolved into a commitment to embed schools within the fabric of families, alumni, and neighborhoods. In this way, the struggle against deficit ideologies opened directly into the work of building schools as community-centered spaces.

The second theme, building schools as community-centered spaces, also drew evidence from every participant, though principals emphasized different strategies ranging from formal parent advocacy structures to relational community presence.

Theme 2: Building Schools as Community-Centered Spaces

Participants consistently described their leadership as inseparable from the communities they served. Schools were not portrayed as stand-alone institutions but as community-centered spaces where families, alumni, and neighborhood organizations were integral to the work of education. For these Black male principals, sustaining leadership required positioning schools as hubs of belonging and empowerment, where the identities and voices of families were not just acknowledged but actively included.

Family engagement was at the heart of this approach. James (P4) explained how he worked to create structures for families to participate in advocacy and leadership: “*Engaging*

families... parent advocacy nights... parent leadership committee.” His comment underscores the importance of moving families from the margins of school decision-making into positions of active influence. David (P1) echoed this orientation, describing how alumni involvement reshaped community perception of the school: *“Seeing the successes... alum came back... doing the thing... shift in the community.”* Both leaders highlighted how schools could become sites of affirmation for families and communities when engagement extended beyond newsletters or compliance-driven events.

Not all engagement came easily, however. Several principals noted the challenges of building trust with families in communities where historical inequities had eroded confidence in schools. Marcus (P2) recounted the slow process of establishing credibility with parents, describing how initial efforts were met with skepticism and low turnout. Though he did not frame this as a failure, his persistence in holding events and inviting participation demonstrated resilience. Over time, families began to recognize his consistency, which in turn shifted their willingness to engage. This reflects Masten’s (2014) argument that resilience is often the product of “ordinary persistence” in the face of challenge, a principle evident in Marcus’s leadership. Also, from the artifact that Marcus submitted ‘Parent Meeting Agenda’ (Table 4.4) you see the evolution and the intentionality of creating inclusive environments where parents felt welcomed to be included in the community space of the school.

Community partnerships further extended the reach of participants’ schools. Anthony (P3) described cultivating collaborations with local organizations to expand opportunities for students: *“Partnerships with community organizations gave our kids opportunities we couldn’t provide on our own.”* His comment reflects the practical and symbolic significance of linking schools with neighborhood institutions. For Anthony, partnerships were not optional extras but

core to his leadership vision, ensuring students accessed resources otherwise unavailable in under-resourced settings.

Terrence (P8) articulated a philosophy of shared ownership that animated his approach to community engagement. In his interview, he stressed the importance of making schools feel like they belonged to the community rather than to an individual leader or even to the staff. While his phrasing did not condense neatly into a soundbite, his narrative emphasized that principals were stewards of community trust, not proprietors of institutions. This perspective resonates with Khalifa et al.'s (2016) CRSL framework, which positions culturally responsive leaders as community advocates who honor the histories, struggles, and contributions of the neighborhoods in which they serve.

Alumni involvement was another mechanism through which principals described schools as community anchored. David's (P1) pride in alumni returning to "do the thing" illustrates how graduates symbolized more than individual success; they represented communal progress and transformation. Christopher (P5), the most veteran participant, emphasized legacy and continuity, explaining that one of his greatest joys as a leader was seeing former students take on leadership roles in education and beyond. For him, alumni accomplishments validated the collective labor of schools and served as evidence of long-term community impact. Terrence's artifact 'Alumni Event Program' (Table 4.4) is evidence that ongoing community building for former students to current students is what creates the school as an institution for community-centered space.

Visibility in community spaces also surfaced as a recurring theme. Lawrence (P7) reflected on the importance of showing up in neighborhood contexts outside of the school: *"...principal is like this very particular space, and it's very isolating and lonely."* While his

comment foregrounded isolation, his narrative also revealed that one antidote was being present in community spaces where relationships could be strengthened. By attending church programs, recreational center events, and neighborhood meetings, Lawrence positioned himself as more than a school administrator, and he became a visible community figure. Jerome (P6) likewise shared that participating in community gatherings was essential for building credibility with families and signaling care beyond academics. Their accounts align with transformational leadership theory, which highlights modeling and relational presence as mechanisms for cultivating trust and shared commitment (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Spirituality and moral calling also infused the ways principals connected schools and communities. Christopher (P5) described his leadership as part of a divine assignment, asserting that his role was to build up both his school and his community. Anthony (P3) spoke of how prayer and gospel music sustained him during difficult periods, giving him the strength to re-enter community spaces with renewed energy. These accounts underscore that for some leaders, community engagement was not just strategic but spiritual, grounded in belief systems that anchored their persistence. Resilience theory acknowledges such belief systems as protective factors that sustain individuals in high-stress environments (Masten, 2014).

As a Black male leader myself, I resonate with these accounts of community leadership. I have seen how showing up in spaces outside of school fosters trust, while also feeling the weight of expectation to be “everywhere” in the community. My reflexive journaling reminded me to separate my own experiences from those of participants, ensuring their voices led the analysis. What became clear is that community engagement is integral, not optional or supplemental, to leadership identity and to sustaining both schools and principals.

Collectively, these narratives illustrate how participants positioned schools as embedded within the communities they served. They engaged families as co-leaders, cultivated partnerships that expanded opportunity, relied on alumni to demonstrate continuity, and made themselves visible in neighborhood spaces. In doing so, they resisted the notion of schools as isolated institutions and instead positioned them as communal hubs of empowerment.

This theme speaks directly to the third research sub-question: *How do culturally responsive leadership practices contribute to the academic and social success of students in schools led by Black male principals?* Participants enacted CRSL by embedding family and community engagement into the daily work of leadership. It also connects to the fourth sub-question: *What systemic supports are essential for sustaining Black male principals?*

Partnerships, alumni, and family engagement were supported for students and leaders alike, providing encouragement, validation, and resources that countered isolation.

In essence, building schools as community-centered spaces was a leadership practice and a survival strategy. By embedding schools within networks of family, faith, alumni, and community partnerships, participants enacted a culturally responsive form of leadership that was sustaining, relational, and transformative. Even as schools were envisioned as communal hubs, the principals themselves often carried the burden of leadership in solitude. The very work of engaging families, alumni, and communities did not erase the reality that, within their districts and leadership networks, Black male principals remained rare. Participants described this paradox: while they created belonging for students and families, they often lacked the same sense of belonging among peers. This tension gives rise to the third theme: sustaining leadership in the face of isolation and struggle.

The third theme, sustaining leadership amid isolation and struggle, emerged from seven of the eight principals, highlighting both the structural loneliness of the role and the diverse resilience practices that enabled leaders to persist.

Theme 3: Sustaining Leadership in Isolation and Struggle

Even as participants described the rewards of leadership, they were equally candid about its costs. A pervasive thread across interviews was the reality of isolation, loneliness, and the constant struggle to balance accountability demands with the moral work of serving students and communities. These principals consistently described leadership as challenging. They describe leading under constant pressure and challenging conditions, such as solitude, racialized scrutiny, and systemic inequities. Yet, despite these challenges, they also revealed how they sustained themselves through resilience practices, affinity networks, faith, and wellness strategies. Sustaining leadership, in their narratives, was not about the absence of struggle but about enduring within it.

Isolation surfaced repeatedly. Lawrence (P7) captured the emotional weight of the role: “...principal is like this very particular space, and it’s very isolating and lonely.” Terrence (P8) similarly reflected on the solitude that came with his position: “...[in] general is lonely, but often, when you are leading in a space and you might be the only person...” David (P1) reinforced this point when he admitted, “...at times it could be like a lonely... job.” Together, these comments reveal that isolation was not incidental but structural: it stemmed from being one of few, or sometimes the only, Black male principals in their districts. Their words align with Tillman’s (2004) findings on the underrepresentation of Black leaders and the emotional toll that comes from leading in contexts where colleagues and supervisors often do not share similar experiences.

Systemic struggle compounded the sense of isolation. Leaders described how external accountability pressures created daily tension. James (P4) put it succinctly: “*Grow the DPI report card score... but there’s got to be more.*” His reflection highlighted frustration with systems that equated success narrowly with test scores, ignoring broader measures of student growth and community wellbeing. David (P1) also described the burden of following white predecessors with more autonomy, explaining that he had to navigate “*hoops and extra pieces*” to prove his legitimacy. These accounts illustrate how systemic inequities intensified struggle, requiring principals to shoulder additional labor even when their schools were succeeding.

Burnout was a constant risk. Jerome (P6) admitted that he was still learning how to balance leadership demands with his own health: his narrative underscored the ongoing challenge of self-care as a principal in high-pressure environments. As Gu and Day (2013) argue, resilience is not a fixed personality trait, but a dynamic capacity shaped by context. The principals’ reliance on wellness routines, peer affinity groups, and faith traditions reflects this adaptive resilience in practice. Their accounts illustrate that sustainability is not achieved through individual strength alone but through a constant negotiation with the pressures and supports of their environments. In this sense, resilience for Black male principals is deeply contextual, rooted in the realities of racialized isolation and the networks that buffer against it. Terrence (P8) described the importance of daily wellness practices such as running and prayer, explaining that without them he could not continue: “*I had to do it every day, or the weight would crush me.*” Their experiences reflect Gu and Day’s (2013) argument that resilience is shaped by professional support and by personal strategies leaders adopt to buffer stress.

Affinity networks emerged as crucial supports that helped principals persist. Lawrence (P7) emphasized the need for connection with peers: “*...leaders of color... it’s like a safe space*

when we find each other.” David (P1) likewise described the significance of professional affinity spaces: “...*affinity group for Black male educators... space that’s safe... not alone... powerful.*”

For both, sustaining leadership was made possible by counterspaces that offered solidarity, validation, and strategies for survival. Ladson-Billings (2000) has described such counterspaces as critical for educators of color, functioning as sites of resistance and affirmation against deficit-oriented environments.

Faith and moral purpose were equally important. Christopher (P5), reflecting on more than a decade of leadership, framed his persistence as a spiritual calling: his words conveyed that his work was not simply professional but divinely guided. Anthony (P3) similarly described how prayer and gospel music anchored him during difficult times, allowing him to re-enter leadership spaces with renewed energy. These accounts reveal that sustaining leadership was technical, spiritual, and grounded in belief systems that provided strength. This resonates with resilience theory’s recognition of values and belief systems as protective factors that enable endurance in adversity (Masten, 2014). Table 4.7 illustrates the details associated with theme 3 as experienced by each participant.

Table 4.7

Isolation and Support Practices (Theme 3)

Participant (Pseudonym & P#)	Isolation Language	Coping Practice	Frequency	Outcome
David (P1)	“Hoops and extra pieces” (re: credibility)	Affinity group support	Monthly	Reduced isolation, retention
Marcus (P2)	“Adults didn’t believe our kids” (systemic)	Data-driven proof	Ongoing	Built legitimacy, stayed in role
Anthony (P3)	“Faith sustains me”	Prayer, gospel music	Weekly	Personal resilience, stress relief

James (P4)	“Grow the DPI score... but more”	Student-centered focus	Ongoing	Purpose over metrics
Christopher (P5)	“Alumni success is what matters”	Alumni engagement	Annual	Reinforces mission
Jerome (P6)	“Seen as disciplinarian”	Redefining role via instruction	Ongoing	Improved perception, clarity
Lawrence (P7)	“Principal is isolating and lonely”	Wellness routines, peer calls	Weekly	Mitigated burnout
Terrence (P8)	“Write their own story”	Legacy framing	Continuous	Anchored leadership in long-term vision

As a Black male leader myself, I found these narratives summarized in Table 4.7 deeply resonant. I have felt the solitude of leadership and the weight of accountability in ways that mirror participants’ accounts. Reflexive journaling helped me acknowledge these parallels while ensuring that their voices, not mine, shaped the findings. What became clear was that isolation and struggle were universal among participants, as were strategies of resilience. Each leader described ways of sustaining that combined personal wellness, affinity networks, and spiritual grounding.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that sustainability for Black male principals is forged in contexts of struggle. Isolation, racialized scrutiny, and systemic inequities were constants. Yet leaders developed practices that enabled them to endure and remain for more than 3 years, a notable achievement given the high turnover among urban principals. Their accounts demonstrate that sustainability was not the absence of struggle but the ability to persist through it, transforming adversity into a source of moral purpose.

This theme addresses the second research sub-question: *What factors influence Black male principals to remain in their leadership roles beyond three years?* by naming the supports and strategies that enabled persistence. Affinity networks, wellness practices, and faith emerged

as central to retention. It also connects to the fourth sub-question: *What systemic supports are essential for sustaining Black male principals?* by highlighting the importance of institutionalizing counter spaces and networks that currently exist informally. Without such support, leaders risk being overwhelmed by isolation and burnout.

In summary, participants portrayed leadership sustainability as a paradox: forged in isolation and struggle yet made possible by practices of resilience. Their narratives remind us that endurance is not evidence of struggle's absence but of leaders' capacity to persist despite it. For these principals, sustaining leadership meant carrying the burdens of inequity while finding ways to remain rooted in purpose, connected to networks, and anchored in belief. The strategies participants developed to endure isolation, like wellness routines, affinity groups, and faith, were not merely coping mechanisms. They reflected deeper convictions about why leadership mattered and for whom it was sustained. As principals described their persistence, it became clear that what enabled them to remain was both resilience and a profound sense of calling. Out of struggle emerged clarity: leadership was sustained by a moral purpose and an orientation toward legacy. This conviction forms the final theme.

Finally, the fourth theme, leading with moral purpose and legacy, was expressed by all participants, who described their leadership not merely as administrative work but as a calling rooted in ethics, justice, and generational impact.

Theme 4: Leadership as Moral Purpose and Legacy

While participants spoke at length about the challenges they faced as leaders, including deficit beliefs, isolation, and systemic inequities, they also described their work as profoundly purposeful. Across the interviews, principals articulated leadership not simply as a career but as a moral calling rooted in service, justice, and legacy. This theme captures how participants found

endurance through resilience practices, grounded in a deep sense of why they led: to transform systems, affirm student identity, and leave behind a legacy for future generations.

Moral purpose was explicit in the way participants framed their decision-making. David (P1) shared a simple but striking guiding principle: *“Do what’s right always... even when no one’s watching... make sure the right thing is happening.”* Sergiovanni (1992) argued that moral authority substitutes for bureaucratic, technical, and psychological authority in schools, grounding leadership in shared values rather than positional power. David’s insistence on always doing “the right thing” embodies this notion of moral authority, showing how ethical convictions provide stability amid systemic pressures. For these leaders, moral purpose was a source of legitimacy, enabling them to guide their schools through inequity while remaining anchored to justice and integrity. His words reveal how ethics anchored leadership decisions beyond external accountability or public recognition. Such a stance reflects Sergiovanni’s (1992) conception of moral leadership, where authority derives from values and virtue rather than positional power. For David, doing right was less about compliance and more about integrity, which he described as his internal compass that oriented him through systemic obstacles.

Terrence (P8) highlighted a similar moral duty, pointing out that his role required him to consistently believe in students’ potential. While his words didn’t form a neat quote, his story emphasized that giving up on high expectations wasn’t an option. To him, believing in students was a moral duty, especially when adults doubted them. This view aligns with CRSL literature (Khalifa et al., 2016), which states that culturally responsive leaders focus on affirming student identity and challenging deficit ideologies.

Legacy emerged as a parallel dimension of moral purpose. Christopher (P5), reflecting on his long tenure, described joy in watching former students return to schools as teachers, coaches,

and leaders. Though he spoke in narrative rather than soundbite, his testimony highlighted how leadership impact extended beyond current test scores into generational transformation.

Similarly, David (P1) framed alumni accomplishments as evidence of success: “*Seeing the successes... alum came back... doing the thing... shift in the community.*” For both leaders, legacy was not abstract; it was embodied in the lives of students who continued to shape communities. This mirrors Tillman’s (2004) emphasis on the intergenerational influence of Black leaders, whose work reverberates in the persistence and success of others.

Spirituality also infused participants’ sense of moral calling. Anthony (P3) shared how prayer and gospel music sustained him in moments of doubt, describing these practices as essential to re-entering his work with renewed commitment. Christopher (P5) framed his leadership as divine assignment, explaining that he understood his role not simply as professional but as spiritual obligation. Their reflections align with resilience theory’s recognition of belief systems as protective factors (Masten, 2014), showing how spirituality functioned as both grounding and motivation.

Importantly, moral purpose also acted as a form of resistance to racialized stereotypes. Jerome (P6) described his effort to redefine what leadership meant for a Black male principal: “*I wanted to be seen as the instructional leader, not just the guy handling discipline.*” His rejection of narrow roles focused on his responsibility to his students, ensuring they viewed Black male leaders as intellectual, caring, and academically rigorous. For Jerome, legacy involved changing how future generations perceive the possibilities of leadership.

Participants also described moral purpose as sustaining in the face of inequity. James (P4), critiquing the narrow focus on test scores, insisted: “*Grow the DPI report card score... but there’s got to be more.*” For him, moral leadership meant resisting reductive definitions of

success and pursuing broader visions of student thriving. Lawrence (P7) described similar convictions, emphasizing the importance of representation: “*Showing what’s possible... same circumstances... leaders like us.*” His reflection framed moral purpose as modeling by embodying what students and communities could aspire to despite systemic obstacles. Table 4.8 represents the culmination of theme 4 across participant responses.

Table 4.8

Moral Purpose & Legacy Indicators (Theme 4)

Participant (Pseudonym & P#)	Moral Compass Phrase	Legacy Indicator	Illustrative Outcome
David (P1)	“Do what’s right always”	Alumni return	Students come back as mentors
Marcus (P2)	“Pour back into the space”	Policy advocacy	School launched parent leadership group
Anthony (P3)	“Faith sustains me”	Mentorship programs	Built pipeline for Black male educators
James (P4)	“There’s got to be more”	Instructional innovation	Created culturally relevant curriculum
Christopher (P5)	“Honor the kid”	DPI award	External validation of equity practices
Jerome (P6)	“Not just disciplinarian”	Role redefinition	Broader identity as instructional leader
Lawrence (P7)	“Leaders like us”	Representation	Visible modeling for Black male students
Terrence (P8)	“Write their own story”	Alumni mentoring	Community transformation through student success

As a researcher and practitioner, I relate to these accounts summarized in Table 4.8. I have often experienced how moral conviction can serve as ballast during turbulent times. At the same time, I bracketed my own belief in legacy and justice to center participants’ narratives. Their stories collectively demonstrate that for Black male principals, leadership is not merely administrative; rather, it is existential. It is about who they are, what they believe, and what they will leave behind.

This theme speaks to all the study's research questions. It responds to the first and second by illustrating how leaders navigate systemic challenges with both resilience and purpose. It speaks to the third by showing how culturally responsive leadership is enacted through belief in students' potential and affirmation of identity. And it addresses the fourth by reminding us that sustaining Black male principals requires structural support, as well as recognition of the moral and spiritual labor they invest in their roles.

In essence, participants portrayed leadership as a vocation marked by justice, ethics, and legacy. Their words underscore that sustaining leadership was not simply about surviving isolation or resisting deficit thinking but about being called to something larger than themselves. For these principals, moral purpose and legacy were the essence of why they stayed. Table 4.9 summarizes key quotes by participants that illustrate each of the themes.

Table 4.9

Exemplar Quote Bank by Theme

Theme	Participant (Pseudonym & P#)	Timestamp	Short Quote	Analytic Note
Resisting Deficit Ideologies Schools as Community- Centered	David (P1)	4:15	Establishing credibility... hoops and extra pieces	Credibility gap tied to race Alumni framed as community success
Sustaining Amid Isolation	David (P1)	19:11	Seeing the successes... alum came back... doing the thing	Isolation structural to role
Moral Purpose & Legacy	Lawrence (P7)	34:00	Principal... isolating and lonely	Ethical compass anchors decisions
	David (P1)	22:37	Do what's right always... even when no one's watching	

The four themes illustrate how the lived experiences of Black male principals were both deeply interconnected and contextually distinct. Resisting deficit beliefs often motivated leaders

to highlight community engagement as evidence of student and school success; community anchoring, in turn, mitigated the isolation of the role; isolation made moral purpose indispensable; and moral purpose reframed struggle as legacy. Yet, while these patterns converged across cases, participants also varied in the emphases they placed on particular practices and philosophies. To capture both convergence and divergence, the following cross-case synthesis situates each theme across all eight principals, using a comparative matrix (Table 4.10) to highlight commonalities, outliers, and the dynamic ways leaders sustained their work.

Cross-Case Synthesis

The four themes outlined above gain additional clarity when examined across cases. Table 4.10 presents a cross-case matrix that shows how each principal contributed to the major analytic categories, with checkmarks marking participation and exemplar quotes illustrating the patterns. This matrix provides more than a structural overview: it highlights the universality of certain experiences, including confronting adult deficit beliefs and embedding schools within communities, while also revealing areas where emphasis varied. For example, while all eight principals described resisting deficit beliefs, not every leader articulated sustainability practices in the same way. By positioning the experiences of all participants side by side, the matrix makes both convergence and divergence visible, offering a comparative lens that enriches the narrative synthesis that follows. The discussion that follows moves beyond the table to “tell the story” behind these patterns, showing how participants’ experiences, both overlapped and diverged in meaningful ways.

Table 4.10

Cross-Case Category Matrix

Category	David (P1)	Marcus (P2)	Anthon y (P3)	James (P4)	Christopher Jerome (P6)	Lawrence (P7)	Terrence	Exemplar Quote
-----------------	-------------------	--------------------	----------------------	-------------------	--------------------------------	----------------------	-----------------	-----------------------

	(P5)					(P8)				
Adult Belief Systems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	“Adults didn’t believe our kids” (Marcus, P2)
Representation & Identity	✓	✓				✓	✓			“Seen as instructional leader not just discipline” (Jerome, P6)
Community /Family Engagement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	“Alum came back doing the thing” (David, P1)
Sustainability/Resilience	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	“Principal is isolating and lonely” (Lawrence, P7)
Moral Purpose & Legacy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	“Do what’s right always” (David, P1)

The matrix reveals several striking consistencies. All participants, without exception, identified adult deficit systems as a central barrier, demonstrating that disbelief in students’ potential was a shared reality across contexts. Community and family engagement also showed complete convergence, though the strategies ranged from structured parent leadership committees to more relational, informal forms of visibility. At the same time, the matrix points to important nuances. For example, while nearly all participants emphasized sustainability and resilience, the ways they described it varied. Some participants highlighted wellness or faith, while others underscored affinity networks. These patterns provide a foundation for the more detailed cross-case synthesis that follows.

The four themes identified in this study are 1. resisting deficit ideologies, 2. embedding schools in community, 3. sustaining amid isolation, and 4. leading with moral purpose. These

themes do not exist as separate experiences; instead, they blend to create a shared narrative of how Black male principals maintain leadership in urban Midwestern schools. By analyzing experiences across participants, this cross-case synthesis highlights commonalities that confirm shared realities and differences that show variation in emphasis and strategy. The analysis demonstrates that sustainability isn't about individual charisma or technical skill but results from ongoing resistance, strong community ties, resilience in solitude, and a sense of moral duty and legacy.

One of the clearest points of convergence across participants was the need to resist deficit ideologies. All eight principals described confronting situations in which adults doubted students' potential or their own leadership legitimacy. David (P1) captured this racialized credibility gap when he noted that, after two white predecessors, he faced "*hoops and extra pieces*" before being granted the same autonomy. Jerome (P6) explained his determination to reject the stereotype of the Black male disciplinarian, stating, "*I wanted to be seen as the instructional leader, not just the guy handling discipline.*" James (P4) expressed his resistance differently, critiquing systemic definitions of success that demanded he "*Grow the DPI report card score... but there's got to be more.*" Although P4 focused less on interpersonal disbelief and more on structural accountability, his narrative reinforced the same central point: deficit thinking about students, leaders, or outcomes was a constant force principals had to resist. This convergence echoes Khalifa et al. 's (2016) findings on culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL), which emphasize that challenging deficit ideologies is foundational to advancing equity.

Equally consistent was the conviction that schools must be rooted in community. Every participant described ways of integrating families, alumni, and local organizations into the life of

the school. James (P4) created parent advocacy nights and leadership committees to formalize engagement. David (P1) celebrated alumni accomplishments as proof of transformation, explaining, “*Seeing the successes... alum came back... doing the thing... shift in the community.*” These practices align directly with Khalifa et al.’s (2016) framework for Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), which emphasizes leaders’ roles as community advocates who validate the voices of families and honor the contributions of alumni. By structuring advocacy nights, elevating parent committees, and celebrating alumni accomplishments, participants enacted CRSL not as abstract theory but as daily practice. Their work demonstrates how culturally responsive leaders extend legitimacy to communities historically marginalized by schools, thereby redefining schools as shared, empowering spaces. Christopher (P5), the most veteran participant, reflected with pride on former students becoming educators and leaders themselves, viewing alumni as living legacy. Others emphasized presence rather than structure: Lawrence (P7) highlighted being visible in churches and neighborhoods, while Jerome (P6) stressed the importance of credibility earned by showing up at community events. Terrence (P8) described his philosophy of shared ownership, insisting that schools belonged to the community, not the principal. Despite varied strategies, the consistency of commitment demonstrates that community engagement was intrinsic to their leadership identity. This reflects CRSL’s second strand: leaders serve as cultural and community advocates, bridging schools and neighborhoods (Khalifa et al., 2016).

If the community anchored principals publicly, isolation defined their private realities. Multiple participants named loneliness explicitly. Lawrence (P7) stated, “*...principal is like this very particular space, and it’s very isolating and lonely.*” Terrence (P8) echoed, “*...[in] general is lonely, but often, when you are leading in a space and you might be the only one.*” David (P1)

admitted, “...at times it could be like a lonely... job.” For others, isolation was described indirectly through the need for networks and resilience strategies. Christopher (P5) pointed to faith as his sustaining force, while Marcus (P2) described persistence as essential even when families did not initially respond to outreach. These narratives underscore that isolation was not simply emotional but structural: the combination of racial underrepresentation and the singular burden of leadership produced solitude that participants had to endure. As Tillman (2004) notes, the underrepresentation of Black leaders creates systemic conditions of marginalization, a reality borne out in participants’ accounts.

Coping strategies varied but confirmed the theme of resilience amid solitude. Some leaned on affinity groups and peer networks (P1, P7), which provided safe spaces to process racialized challenges. Others turned inward, sustaining themselves through wellness practices (P6, P8) or spiritual disciplines (P3, P5). These divergences do not weaken the theme but enrich it, showing that while isolation was universal, strategies for endurance were contextually adapted. According to Gu and Day (2013), resilience depends on both individual resources (like skills or mindset) and environmental conditions (like support). This idea is reflected in how these leaders sustained themselves by using a wide range of purposeful methods.

Finally, moral purpose and legacy were the thread that bound participants’ persistence together. David (P1) articulated his guiding principle clearly: “*Do what’s right always... even when no one’s watching... make sure the right thing is happening.*” James (P4) insisted that leadership required seeing beyond standardized test scores, repeating, “*there’s got to be more.*” Lawrence (P7) emphasized the symbolic role of representation: “*Showing what’s possible... same circumstances... leaders like us.*” Christopher (P5) and Anthony (P3) drew on spirituality, framing leadership as a divine calling and describing prayer and gospel music as essential practices. Across cases, participants viewed their roles not simply as jobs but as vocations,

sustained by ethics, justice, and generational impact. This aligns with Sergiovanni's (1992) notion of moral leadership, in which authority rests in virtue and purpose rather than in formal position. Table 4.11 highlights the negative or outlier cases that surfaced across the four major themes and illustrates how individual participants diverged from the dominant patterns.

Table 4.11

Outlier/Negative Case Tracker

Theme	Typical Pattern	Outlier Case(s)	Nature of Divergence	Interpretation
Resisting Deficit Ideologies	All principals cited deficit adult beliefs	James (P4)	Framed challenge more around accountability metrics	Suggests systemic pressure reframed deficit in bureaucratic terms
Schools as Community-Centered	Family & alumni engagement central	Christopher (P5)	Less emphasis on parents, more alumni focus	Community defined more by graduates than families
Sustaining Amid Isolation	Most used affinity or wellness practices	Marcus (P2), Christopher (P5)	Did not name personal wellness; focused on results	Suggests sustainability through outcomes rather than self-care
Moral Purpose & Legacy	Anchored in ethical/moral compass	James (P4)	Framed "legacy" as instructional innovation not alumni return	Shows diverse ways legacy is conceptualized

The outliers highlighted in Table 4.11 help refine the themes by showing that Black male principals do not experience or enact leadership in identical ways, even when they share common challenges.

In the theme related to resisting deficit ideologies, nearly all principals described adult beliefs that diminished student potential. James represented a distinct case because he framed the issue primarily in terms of external accountability systems rather than cultural or relational factors. His perspective shows that resistance can take a more technical or compliance-based form when leaders feel pressure to meet state expectations.

In the theme on schools as community-centered spaces, most leaders emphasized parents, families, and local networks. Christopher diverged by giving greater weight to alumni engagement. His understanding of community was shaped more by long-standing relationships with former students than by partnerships with current families, indicating that community can be defined across time as well as place.

For sustaining amid isolation, most principals cited wellness practices, spiritual grounding, or affinity networks as crucial to their persistence. Marcus and Christopher differed from this pattern. Marcus did not describe personal wellness strategies but instead linked his endurance to the work of demonstrating student achievement. For him, producing strong results served as a source of energy and validation. This variation shows that some leaders sustain themselves through evidence of progress rather than through intentional restorative practices.

In the theme of moral purpose and legacy, most participants described legacy in terms of community uplift and the long-term success of their students. James offered a different view by associating legacy with instructional improvement. His case illustrates that the idea of legacy is not uniform and may emphasize either community impact or technical innovation.

Overall, the outlier cases confirm that while the four themes capture shared experiences, they also contain meaningful variations. These differences help clarify the range of ways Black male principals respond to systemic challenges and sustain their leadership. The table, therefore, strengthens the findings by identifying both the common patterns and the exceptions that deepen understanding of the phenomenon.

As a researcher and practitioner, I was struck by how strongly these narratives resonate with my own leadership journey. I, too, have faced deficit assumptions, experienced isolation, and leaned on community and moral conviction for endurance. Reflexive journaling reminded

me to bracket these resonances, ensuring that my interpretations did not overshadow participants' voices. Yet the convergence across their accounts underscores the validity of what I have also known experientially: sustainability for Black male principals is not defined by ease but by resilience within struggle.

Taken together, the cross-case analysis shows that sustainability emerges through resistance, belonging, resilience, and moral conviction. All eight principals confirmed these patterns, with P4 providing an important outlier by emphasizing systemic accountability pressures over interpersonal deficit beliefs. Such variation enriches rather than undermines the synthesis, reminding us that leadership experiences are both collective and contextual. Ultimately, what unites these leaders is their capacity to transform inequity into purpose: to confront deficit beliefs, root schools in communities, endure isolation, and persist because their moral compass demands it. This insight leads directly into the next section, which distills these convergences into the phenomenological essence of the experience.

Essence of the Phenomenon

At the center of this study lies a paradox: Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools sustain leadership not because conditions are easy, but because they choose to persist despite conditions that often conspire against them. Their lived experience, distilled across eight narratives, reveals a leadership journey marked by resistance, community, solitude, and moral purpose. The essence of sustaining leadership is not survival despite adversity, but transformation through it: these men turned deficit views into evidence of student brilliance, isolation into conviction, and inequity into legacy.

The essence begins with resistance. Participants entered schools where adults doubted their students and often doubted them. David (P1) recalled "*hoops and extra pieces*" that white

predecessors never faced. Jerome (P6) rejected the assumption that he was “*just the guy handling discipline,*” demanding recognition as an instructional leader. James (P4) critiqued the relentless narrowing of leadership to “*Grow the DPI report card score... but there’s got to be more.*” This resistance was daily, not episodic: a constant push against deficit ideologies that sought to define students as incapable and leaders as suspect. Yet rather than accept those definitions, principals stood in the fire. They used presence, data, alumni success, and community engagement to rewrite narratives of both student ability and Black leadership.

Alongside resistance, the essence was anchored in community. Every principal spoke of schools not as isolated institutions but as shared spaces where families, alumni, and neighborhoods shaped the work. James (P4) organized advocacy nights and committees; David (P1) celebrated when “*alum came back... doing the thing... shift in the community.*” Lawrence (P7) emphasized visibility in churches and neighborhoods, while Terrence (P8) described schools as belonging to the community rather than himself. For Christopher (P5), legacy was watching former students become educators and leaders. These stories reveal that sustainability comes from belonging: schools that thrive are schools embedded in the life of the community, affirming students and families as co-authors of success.

But even as schools were anchored outwardly, principals lived inwardly in solitude. Leadership was described as “*lonely*” (P1), “*isolating*” (P7), and “*general is lonely... might be the only one*” (P8). This isolation was not simply about workload but about representation, like being one of the only, or the only, Black male principal in the district. It meant making decisions without peers who shared similar lived experience. The solitude could weigh heavy, pushing some toward burnout, yet it also sharpened conviction. Affinity groups became lifelines, safe spaces where leaders could breathe and be understood. Faith and wellness routines became

protective factors, buffers against exhaustion. In this solitude, the essence of leadership was not abandonment but resilience: sustaining meant finding ways to endure loneliness without letting it erode purpose.

What ultimately sustained participants was moral purpose and legacy. Leadership was not a job but a calling, rooted in ethics, justice, and belief in students. David (P1) declared his principle simply: “*Do what’s right always... even when no one’s watching.*” Christopher (P5) framed his leadership as divine assignment, Anthony (P3) described prayer and gospel music as sustaining, and Lawrence (P7) insisted that representation meant “*showing what’s possible... leaders like us.*” These moral commitments extended beyond their own tenure into legacy. Seeing alumni return as educators, leaders, and community builders validated the sacrifices of leadership. For Terrence (P8), the purpose was to ensure students could “*write their own story*” rather than have it written for them by deficit narratives. Sustaining leadership meant holding fast to an ethic larger than self, orienting every decision toward justice, affirmation, and generational transformation.

In conclusion, the essence of the phenomenon is this: to be a Black male principal sustaining leadership in an urban school is to lead with superpowers born of struggle. It is to resist deficit ideologies that constantly question students’ and your own worth. It is to anchor schools in communities so deeply that alumni success and family advocacy become your most powerful rebuttals to doubt. It is to endure the loneliness of leadership, often as the only Black man in the room, while building counterspaces of solidarity and practicing resilience. And it is to ground yourself in a moral purpose so profound that even exhaustion cannot dislodge it.

The principals in this study do not describe sustainability as easy. They describe it as standing in the fire, writing their own story, and modeling what is possible for students who see

themselves in them. The essence of their leadership is not survival in difficult times and struggle but transformation through it by turning deficit into resistance, isolation into conviction, and struggle into legacy. In phenomenological terms, these accounts illustrate what van Manen (1990) describes as the orientation of essence: lived meanings that describe experience while guiding practice. For the principals in this study, the essence of sustaining leadership was not survival despite adversity but transformation through it. Their metaphors of “standing in the fire,” “writing their own story,” and “showing what’s possible” embody van Manen’s assertion that essence provides pedagogical orientation. That is, essence is not an abstract summary but a practical guide for how leaders continue their work: resistance becomes advocacy, solitude becomes conviction, and inequity becomes a call to legacy. By framing sustainability as transformation rather than endurance, participants revealed lived meanings that orient leadership toward justice and hope, even in contexts structured by systemic inequity.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings of a phenomenological study exploring the lived experiences of eight Black male principals who sustained leadership for more than three years in urban Midwestern schools serving predominantly students of color. Through a rigorous analytic process of in vivo coding, pattern coding, category clustering, cross-case synthesis, and thematic development, four central themes emerged: resisting deficit ideologies, building schools as community-centered spaces, sustaining amid isolation and struggle, and leading with moral purpose and legacy. Taken together, these themes distilled into the phenomenological essence of sustaining leadership: to endure not despite struggle, but through it, transforming deficit into resistance, isolation into conviction, and inequity into legacy.

The findings spoke directly to the study's research questions. First, regarding the systemic challenges and barriers faced by Black male principals, participants consistently identified deficit ideologies, whether in the form of adults' disbelief in students, the racialized questioning of principals' legitimacy, or narrow accountability definitions, as persistent obstacles. These barriers, however, were not met with resignation but with resistance, as leaders insisted on affirming student potential and reframing what success meant.

Second, concerning the factors that influenced principals to remain beyond three years, the findings highlighted resilience practices, affinity networks, and wellness routines, but above all, moral purpose. Participants described their work as a calling, grounded in justice, ethics, and legacy. This sense of vocation provided a sustaining force, allowing them to persist even when isolation or fatigue threatened.

Third, in relation to how culturally responsive leadership practices contributed to student success, principals demonstrated CRSL by embedding schools within communities. They did this through parent advocacy nights, alumni engagement, community partnerships, and visibility in local spaces. These practices affirmed cultural identities and challenged deficit perspectives, showing that CRSL was not abstract theory but lived practice.

Finally, in addressing what systemic supports were essential for sustaining Black male principals, the findings revealed both strengths and gaps. Informal affinity networks were critical supports, providing safe spaces and validation. Yet participants noted the lack of institutionalized support, leaving sustainability too dependent on individual resilience rather than systemic change.

Throughout the analysis, strategies to ensure trustworthiness were maintained. Member checking, reflexive journaling, triangulation of interviews with artifacts, and a clear audit trail of

coding decisions provided credibility and confirmability. Reflexivity was crucial, as my positionality as a Black male leader resonated deeply with participants' accounts. By bracketing my own experiences while acknowledging their influence, I sought to honor participants' voices and maintain methodological rigor.

The findings also underscore the interplay among themes. Resistance to deficit ideologies often motivated principals to highlight community engagement; community anchoring, in turn, mitigated isolation; isolation made moral purpose indispensable; and legacy reframed struggle as a worthwhile investment in future generations. This interdependence suggests that sustainability is not a linear process but an ecosystem of reinforcing practices and convictions.

These findings support prior research on Black leadership and resilience and expand the field of leadership sustainability. Tillman (2004) documented how systemic inequities after *Brown v. Board* reshaped the paths of Black educators, while Santamaría and Santamaría (2012) highlighted the identity work required of leaders of color. The principals in this study build on that foundation by demonstrating that sustainability is about enduring inequality, but also about transforming it into a sense of belonging, moral legacy, and resistance-as-leadership. In doing so, their experiences expand the meaning of sustainability in leadership studies beyond retention and longevity to include purpose, justice, and multigenerational impact.

As this chapter has shown, sustaining leadership for Black male principals is not defined by comfort or ease. It is defined by persistence through adversity, anchored in community, and guided by moral compass and legacy. The essence of their experience can be captured in the words of Terrence (P8), who insisted on ensuring students could “write their own story” rather than have it written for them. Their leadership is about creating conditions where students, families, and communities can thrive, even in the face of systemic inequities.

With these findings in view, the next chapter situates them within the broader theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory, Culturally Responsive School Leadership, Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership. Chapter 5 interprets the findings in relation to these frameworks, highlights implications for practice and policy, and suggests directions for future research. By moving from description to interpretation, Chapter 5 demonstrates how the essence of sustaining leadership among Black male principals offers both a critique of existing systems and a roadmap for more equitable futures.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Black male principals who have led Midwestern urban schools serving predominantly students of color for more than three years. In a field characterized by high turnover and systemic inequities, the experiences of these leaders reveal what it means to persist, to sustain excellence, and to lead with both courage and conviction. The study sought to understand the challenges Black leaders face, as well as the rewards, practices, and beliefs that enable their longevity. One main question: *What are the lived experiences of Black male principals who sustain leadership for more than three years in urban Midwestern school settings with predominantly students of color, and how do they achieve and maintain academic improvement during their tenure?* Coupled with four sub questions guided this inquiry:

1. What systemic challenges and barriers do Black male principals encounter in urban school settings?
2. What factors influence Black male principals to remain in their leadership roles beyond three years?
3. How do culturally responsive leadership practices influence their persistence and school success?
4. What systemic supports (e.g., mentorship, policy changes, or community engagement) are essential for sustaining Black male principals in urban educational settings?

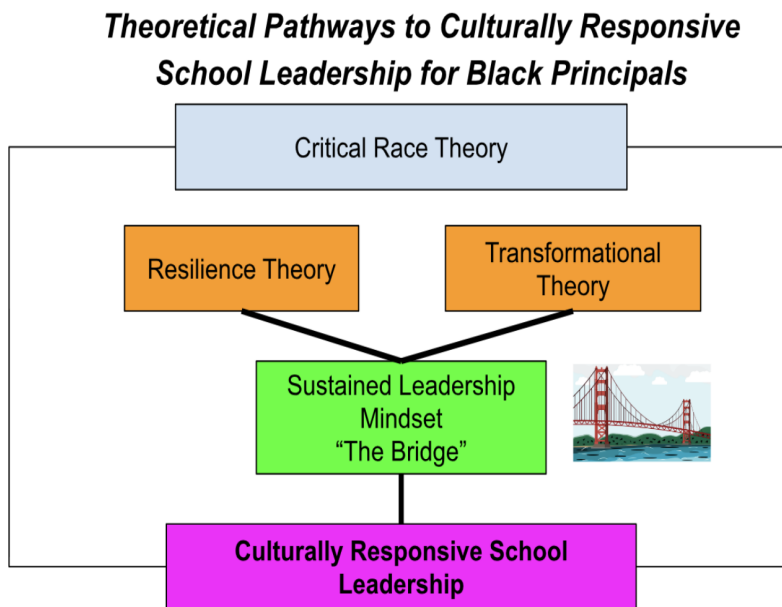
This study was grounded in the phenomenological traditions of Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990), whose methods seek to uncover the essence of lived experience. Using

horizontalization, each statement in the data was given equal weight before clustering into thematic structures that captured shared meaning. Bracketing was employed to surface and intentionally suspend my own assumptions as a Black male school leader, allowing participants' voices to stand on their own while still acknowledging the interpretive lens I bring. Data triangulation across interviews, artifacts, and analytic memos ensured trustworthiness, while member reflections offered participants opportunities to confirm the authenticity of emerging insights.

Chapter 4 presented a descriptive account of these findings, highlighting four interwoven themes:

1. Resisting deficit beliefs and stereotypes,
2. Building schools as community-centered spaces,
3. Sustaining leadership amid isolation and struggle, and
4. Leading with moral purpose and legacy.

In Chapter 5, the focus shifts from description to interpretation, moving from *what* participants experienced to *how* those experiences deepen understanding of leadership, race, and sustainability. This discussion situates the themes within four theoretical frames: 1) Critical Race Theory (CRT), 2) Resilience Theory, 3) Transformational Leadership, and 4) Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) to illuminate how these frameworks converge in shaping the lived realities of Black male principals. The integration of these theories is represented in Figure 5.1 below.

Figure 5.1*Theoretical Pathways to Culturally Responsive School Leadership for Black Principals*

Note. This conceptual framework illustrates the interconnected theoretical foundations guiding the study. Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998) frames the systemic and racialized conditions under which Black male principals lead. Resilience Theory (Masten, 2014; Gu & Day, 2013) and Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006) operate as dynamic supports that sustain leadership longevity, forming what is termed the *Sustained Leadership Mindset*, symbolized here as “The Bridge.” This bridge connects the adaptive strength and moral purpose of leaders to the broader goal of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa et al., 2016), where principals enact equity-driven practices rooted in community, belonging, and justice. Together, these pathways describe how Black male principals sustain leadership that is simultaneously resistant, restorative, and transformative.

As this framework illustrates, the four theories are interconnected, not discrete. Critical Race Theory provides *the why*, which includes the systemic context of racialized struggle and the necessity of resistance. Culturally Responsive School Leadership offers *the how*, or the daily practices through which leaders build community, affirm identity, and transform schools into culturally grounded spaces. Resilience Theory and Transformational Leadership together explain *the what*, which includes the internal, moral, and spiritual capacities that sustain leaders through adversity. This synthesis, which is elaborated in Section 5.6, forms the Sustained Leadership Mindset: a bridge between critical awareness and moral action, through which Black male principals transform struggle into sustainability and leadership into legacy.

This framework provides the interpretive lens through which the study's findings are analyzed. It positions the sustained leadership of Black male principals as a bridge between personal resilience and collective transformation, or a pathway through which critical awareness becomes culturally responsive practice. The sections that follow apply this framework to each emergent theme, beginning with how principals resist deficit beliefs and stereotypes that devalue their students and communities.

Interpreting the Themes

As the preceding themes and the phenomenological essence statement have detailed, the lived experiences of Black male principals who sustain leadership in urban Midwestern schools reveal a process of transformation through struggle. Rather than revisiting each theme descriptively, this section interprets them through their guiding theoretical frameworks while emphasizing their interdependence. Taken together, these experiences form the Sustained Leadership Mindset, consisting of a synthesis of moral purpose, cultural grounding, and critical consciousness that converts adversity into legacy. Each theme foregrounds one framework yet

inevitably touches all four, illustrating that sustainability is neither linear nor isolated but a braided practice of justice, belonging, resilience, and hope.

Resisting Deficit Beliefs and Stereotypes

Viewed through Critical Race Theory, resistance operates as a structural redesign rather than episodic defiance. One principal recalled “jumping through hoops and extra pieces” that white predecessors never faced, while another rejected being seen as “just the guy handling discipline.” These leaders confronted majoritarian narratives by transforming school systems, including the language, policy, and metrics used, to affirm student brilliance and reject deficit framings. As one participant explained, “I start every meeting with examples of Black excellence before we even look at data. It changes the energy in the room.” In doing so, they performed the work of Culturally Responsive School Leadership by aligning pedagogy and policy with cultural affirmation, and they enacted the moral courage central to Transformational Leadership, modeling integrity under pressure. Their resistance therefore links critique (CRT), culturally grounded redesign (CRSL), and purpose-driven influence (Transformational Leadership). Leadership preparation and district development should cultivate this integrated stance, where leaders prioritize training leaders to interrogate inequity, reconstruct systems around belonging, and ground every technical decision in moral clarity.

Building Schools as Community-Centered Spaces

Through the lens of Culturally Responsive School Leadership, community engagement becomes both pedagogy and governance. Several principals described their schools as “the heartbeat of the neighborhood,” places where families came for conferences as well as community meals, financial literacy nights, and cultural celebrations. Another leader emphasized, “I make sure every parent knows me; not just what they do, but who they are.” Yet

this community work is inseparable from Critical Race Theory's call to challenge deficit assumptions about families and neighborhoods, and from Transformational Leadership's emphasis on shared vision and moral service. Phenomenologically, the "lived space" of the school becomes communal rather than institutional, where resilience, conceptualized by Resilience Theory, is continually replenished through relational reciprocity. Community-centered leadership, then, is the intersection of affirmation (CRT), cultural practice (CRSL), moral purpose (Transformational Leadership), and sustainability (Resilience). Policies should formalize community co-governance and measure success through relational and cultural indicators, recognizing that partnership is not peripheral to equity. Rather, it is equity.

Sustaining Leadership Amid Isolation and Struggle

Resilience, in this study, emerges as relational, spiritual, and moral rather than merely psychological. One principal described the experience bluntly: "It's lonely work. Some days you feel like you're the only one standing in the gap." Another reflected that prayer and gospel music each morning "center me before I walk into the fire again." Their endurance draws from the same communal and moral foundations that CRT, CRSL, and Transformational Leadership illuminate: critical awareness of racialized structures, connection to community, and moral purpose that transcends circumstance. Their resilience transforms solitude into conviction and fatigue into faith. Sustainability, therefore, is not the triumph of toughness but the orchestration of multiple supports, including belief systems, brotherhoods, and practices of rest, that align the personal with the political. Districts and preparation programs must embed race-conscious mentoring, spiritual and wellness supports, and reflective affinity spaces that link professional growth with moral renewal.

Leading with Moral Purpose and Legacy

Moral purpose is the throughline of every preceding theme. It is the ethical engine that fuels resistance, community building, and resilience. Participants frequently described their leadership as a calling. One principal shared, “This is my ministry without a pulpit,” while another noted, “My students need to see a Black man lead with love and excellence.” Framed by Transformational Leadership, moral purpose defines influence through authenticity and vision; illuminated by CRT, it becomes a counter-narrative to dehumanizing structures; expressed through CRSL, it centers cultural affirmation; and sustained through Resilience Theory, it endures across time and adversity. Legacy, then, is the temporal expression of this integrated mindset: leaders act in the present while consciously shaping the future. Their longevity testifies that transformation begins not in policy but in purpose, continually renewed through community and faith. Leadership programs should guide principals to articulate a public moral platform, translate it into daily operational choices, and cultivate successors who continue that work, ensuring that justice, not position, endures.

Integrative Reflection

Across these interwoven interpretations, the themes form a single ecology of sustainability. Resistance generates community trust; community belonging replenishes resilience; resilience reinforces moral purpose; and moral purpose sustains resistance. This cyclical dynamic, represented in Figure 5.1, defines the Sustained Leadership Mindset: a living model of how Black male principals transform adversity into advocacy, isolation into conviction, and struggle into legacy.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study deepen understanding of how Black male principals sustain

leadership within urban schools by extending and weaving together four key theoretical traditions: Critical Race Theory (CRT), Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), Resilience Theory, and Transformational Leadership. Together, these frameworks illuminate the multifaceted nature of leadership longevity in racially and structurally inequitable systems. Rather than operating as discrete theories, the data reveal that they intersect dynamically, thus forming what this study identifies as a *Sustained Leadership Mindset*. This mindset is both a moral orientation and a leadership practice that connects personal endurance to collective transformation.

The starting point of this theoretical conversation lies in Critical Race Theory (CRT), which provides the foundation for understanding the racialized landscape in which these leaders operate. CRT posits that racism is endemic to U.S. institutions, including education, and that equity work must confront systemic structures rather than simply remediate individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Participants' experiences affirm this assertion vividly. Their stories show that leading while Black requires an ongoing practice of resistance. Some examples of this type of resistance include pushing against deficit ideologies, biased discipline policies, and the subtle racial scripts that shape expectations for students and staff alike. Yet, this study also extends CRT by showing that sustained resistance, when exercised over multiple years, evolves into institutional transformation. Longevity allowed these principals to embed anti-deficit practices into the fabric of their schools through hiring, curriculum, and professional learning, thereby shifting CRT's concept of counter-storytelling from *narrative* to *organizational reform*. In doing so, the principals demonstrated that racial justice work in schools can move beyond critique to become a sustainable and systemic practice.

From this foundation of resistance and transformation emerges the heart of Culturally

Responsive School Leadership (CRSL). Building on Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016), participants exemplified leaders who cultivated schools as community-centered spaces, or environments that reflected and celebrated the cultural wealth of their neighborhoods (Yosso, 2005). Their leadership moved beyond inclusion toward belonging. They did not merely invite families into existing structures but reshaped those structures to honor communal voices. In this sense, CRSL is a proactive reimagining of what schooling can be when rooted in community identity. This study contributes to CRSL scholarship by introducing *sustainability* as a critical and previously underexplored dimension. Culturally responsive leadership, when sustained over time, becomes a form of institution-building: leaders embed practices that will outlast them. The principals' commitment to their schools transformed advocacy into legacy, illustrating that CRSL, at its most powerful, operates as a long-term cultural reclamation project.

While CRT and CRSL together explain how leaders confront and reconstruct systems, Resilience Theory helps us understand how they continue to do so despite personal and institutional adversity. Traditional resilience research (Masten, 2014) has often emphasized individual adaptation, defined as the ability to recover and “bounce back.” Yet, the participants in this study reframed resilience not as solitary endurance but as a communal and moral process. Their strength came from faith, family, and fellowship. Through daily rituals of reflection and connection, they transformed struggle into purpose. Consistent with Gu and Day's (2013) findings, their resilience was dynamic, evolving through relationships that nurtured hope and reinforced meaning. This study extends Resilience Theory by showing that for Black male principals, resilience functions as *moral perseverance*: a collective commitment to remain grounded in justice, love, and service even when faced with exhaustion or marginalization. In this light, resilience is not passive survival. Rather, it is active resistance to despair.

This moral grounding naturally connects to Transformational Leadership Theory, which provides a language for the participants' ability to inspire, mobilize, and sustain others through their vision and values. Bass and Riggio (2006) describe transformational leaders as those who elevate followers' motivation and morality. The Black male principals in this study did precisely that, but they extended the concept by embedding it within a social justice context. Their transformation was not simply organizational; it was emancipatory. Their moral purpose, deeply tied to faith and cultural identity, radiated outward to staff, students, and families. They modeled what Sergiovanni (1992) calls "moral authority," which is described as leading from authenticity rather than hierarchy, and what Fullan (2001) terms "the moral imperative," where leadership transcends managerial success and becomes an ethical calling. Their work demonstrates that transformation grounded in racial and cultural consciousness produces both improved schools and renewed communities.

Taken together, these frameworks do not merely coexist; they converge into a Sustained Leadership Mindset that captures the essence of how these leaders persist. CRT explains *why* resistance is necessary; CRSL reveals *how* that resistance transforms schools into community-centered spaces; Resilience Theory shows *what* sustains leaders internally; and Transformational Leadership illustrates *who* they become as moral visionaries through that process. The participants embodied this synthesis through their daily practices, like turning systemic critique into cultural creation, isolation into collective strength, and struggle into legacy.

Ultimately, this study reframes leadership sustainability as more than professional endurance. Leadership is a form of moral and cultural stewardship. The theoretical implications underscore that sustaining leadership among Black male principals requires integrating critical consciousness, relational resilience, and visionary purpose into a single, enduring practice. Their

leadership is both a product of resistance and a testament to renewal. In doing so, this study contributes to leadership scholarship, a more holistic paradigm that defines sustainability not by tenure alone but by the moral impact a leader leaves behind.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings of this study offer vital lessons for how schools, universities, and policymakers can better sustain the leadership of Black male principals. Their lived experiences reveal that longevity in leadership is not simply a function of individual willpower, but the product of relational ecosystems, moral conviction, and institutional support. This section translates those insights into actionable implications for practice, preparation, and policy, all grounded in the belief that sustaining leadership requires sustaining the people who lead.

Reframing Leadership as Cultural Stewardship

At the heart of the findings is a shift in how leadership itself should be understood. The participants' success came not from managerial control but from moral clarity and cultural connectedness. They saw themselves as stewards of their students' humanity and leaders whose work extended beyond academic metrics to restoring community pride and possibility. For practicing principals, this means viewing leadership less as supervision and more as *cultural stewardship*. Sustaining leadership requires the daily practice of care, empathy, and self-awareness. One participant described these leadership practices as "leading with love and fire at the same time."

Districts can help cultivate this stewardship by building reflective spaces where leaders process the racialized pressures of their roles and connect with peers who share their experiences. Professional development must move beyond compliance to include identity work, mindfulness, and culturally responsive reflection. These supports are not luxuries; they are the

necessary conditions for ethical endurance. As one participant explained, “You can’t sustain what you can’t name.” Supporting Black leaders means creating spaces where they can name the realities of their work and draw strength from shared wisdom.

Strengthening Leadership Preparation and Mentorship

These findings also point toward a transformation in how principal preparation programs conceptualize success. Too often, aspiring leaders are trained in operations and accountability but not in the emotional and cultural demands of leading in racialized systems. The participants’ stories reveal that what sustains leaders is both knowledge of policy and a deep sense of purpose, identity, and community.

Preparation programs, therefore, must integrate coursework and experiential learning that explicitly address race, resilience, and cultural responsiveness. Grounding leadership preparation in frameworks like CRSL (Khalifa et al., 2016) and resilience theory (Masten, 2014) ensures that graduates understand leadership as both technical and spiritual work. Moreover, universities and districts should formalize mentorship networks that pair emerging leaders of color with seasoned principals who have successfully navigated similar environments. As the participants demonstrated, mentorship provides both professional guidance and emotional validation, a reminder that no one must lead alone.

By reimagining preparation programs as incubators of purpose rather than pipelines of compliance, institutions can help ensure that the next generation of Black leaders enters the field equipped to thrive, not merely survive.

Building Systems That Sustain Leaders, Not Just Measure Them

While preparation and practice matter, sustainability ultimately depends on the systems that surround leaders. At the policy level, this study underscores the need to redefine what

“success” means for principals. Accountability structures that reward short-term test gains while ignoring culture-building perpetuate burnout and turnover. Districts and policymakers must recognize that sustained leadership emerges from climates of belonging, not from fear or surveillance.

This means implementing policies that measure and reward *relational* and *cultural* outcomes, such as staff retention, community trust, and student belonging. It also means funding affinity-based principal networks and wellness initiatives that holistically support leaders of color. When states and districts invest in these ecosystems, they affirm that Black male principals are not expendable change agents but essential architects of equity.

Additionally, policies should elevate culturally responsive leadership to the same level of priority as instructional quality or fiscal management. Requiring professional learning in equity, restorative practice, and community engagement should become part of the certification and renewal process for all school leaders. Embedding these expectations into policy signals that moral and cultural responsiveness are integral to educational excellence, not optional add-ons.

From Individual Resilience to Collective Care

Across practice, preparation, and policy, the central implication is clear: sustainability must move from being an *individual burden* to a *collective responsibility*. The participants’ longevity was sustained not by exceptional toughness but by systems of care, belonging, and affirmation that reinforced their purpose. This redefinition of sustainability aligns with Khalifa’s (2018) call for leadership that is both community-rooted and socially transformative.

As educational institutions seek to recruit and retain leaders of color, they must ask *who* is leading and *what conditions* make that leadership enduring. Supporting Black male principals is not an act of charity; it is an act of justice. Their sustained leadership benefits entire

communities by modeling resilience, restoring faith in schools, and cultivating pathways for future leaders.

In the end, the practical and policy implications of this study converge on a single truth: sustaining Black male principals sustains hope. Their stories remind us that leadership longevity results from intention, care, and courage. When systems create the conditions for these leaders to thrive, they affirm that education is about both academic achievement and humanity. To invest in the sustainability of Black male principals is to invest in the moral and cultural future of schooling itself.

Limitations of the Study

Every research study exists within certain boundaries, and acknowledging those boundaries strengthens, rather than weakens, the credibility of the work. This phenomenological inquiry sought to capture the lived experiences of Black male principals who sustained leadership beyond three years in Midwestern, urban schools serving predominantly students of color. While the findings illuminate meaningful patterns and extend important theoretical conversations, they should be interpreted within the context of several limitations related to scope, design, and researcher positionality.

Sample Size and Contextual Boundaries

This study was intentionally limited to a small, purposeful sample of 8 participants. Such a size is consistent with phenomenological research, which aims for depth rather than breadth (Moustakas, 1994). The smaller sample allowed for prolonged engagement with each participant's story, enabling a rich, nuanced understanding of meaning and essence. However, the findings are not meant to be statistically generalizable. Rather, they offer *transferability* such that insights that readers may see reflected in similar contexts, particularly within urban schools

or leadership settings serving historically marginalized populations.

Additionally, the study was regionally focused on Midwestern urban districts. Geographic and sociopolitical factors in the Midwest, such as racial demographics, policy environments, and historical segregation, shape leadership experiences in ways that may differ from those in other parts of the country. Future research in other regions could test the resonance of these findings across different policy and cultural landscapes.

Data and Source Limitations

The study relied primarily on semi-structured interviews, supported by limited artifacts such as school improvement plans, newsletters, and public communications. While these documents helped triangulate the data, the depth and type of available artifacts varied across participants. Some leaders had extensive written reflections and public materials, while others had fewer accessible documents. Consequently, the analysis leaned more heavily on interview data, which centers lived voice but may underrepresent institutional evidence of impact.

Furthermore, because the interviews were self-reported, participants may have selectively emphasized certain experiences or framed their narratives through a lens of professional pride. As the researcher, I worked to mitigate this limitation through member checking, triangulation, and reflexive journaling. Nonetheless, phenomenological data always reflect co-constructed meaning between researcher and participant, shaped by context and dialogue.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a Black male school leader studying the experiences of other Black male leaders, I entered the research with a shared identity and understanding that offered both strengths and risks. This positionality provided immediate trust and relational depth during interviews; participants often shared candid, emotionally charged reflections that might not have emerged

with a researcher of different background. However, such proximity also required disciplined reflexivity.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I engaged in bracketing (epoché) to surface and set aside my own experiences and assumptions. I maintained analytic memos after each interview to record moments of resonance or bias and consulted with peer reviewers to challenge interpretive blind spots. Still, complete bracketing is impossible. My understanding of the phenomenon inevitably bears traces of my own lived experiences, which both enrich and delimit this study's interpretation.

Temporal and Design Considerations

The study captured participants' experiences at a single moment in time. Leadership sustainability, however, is an evolving process shaped by changing policy conditions, school cultures, and personal growth. A longitudinal design could have revealed how participants' resilience strategies or moral commitments shift over the course of their leadership journeys. Similarly, the use of phenomenology privileged deep meaning making but did not quantitatively measure outcomes such as student achievement or staff retention, which could complement qualitative insights.

Despite these boundaries, the study's phenomenological approach allowed for profound insight into the human dimensions of leadership like faith, fatigue, conviction, and legacy that often elude quantitative inquiry. The limitations described here do not diminish the study's contribution; rather, they clarify its contours and open pathways for future exploration.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study illuminate the depth and complexity of sustaining leadership among Black male principals and revealing important areas for further inquiry. Phenomenology

allowed this study to capture the lived meanings behind leadership longevity; however, the experiences shared by participants suggest that the phenomenon of sustained, culturally responsive leadership among leaders of color deserves continued and expanded exploration. The following recommendations identify opportunities to deepen, broaden, and diversify future research on this critical topic.

Expand the Scope to Include Multi-Regional and Comparative Studies

This study focused on the urban Midwest because it provided a rich but bounded understanding of context. Future research should explore how regional, policy, and sociocultural differences influence the sustainability of Black male principals across various parts of the United States. Comparative studies conducted in more regions, like the South, East Coast, and West Coast, could reveal how factors like local politics, racial demographics, or community histories shape leaders' capacity to persist.

Additionally, research might examine how Black male principals' experiences compare to those of other leaders of color, including Black women, Latina/o, Asian American, and Indigenous principals. Such comparative inquiry could highlight both shared challenges and identity-specific strategies for resilience and culturally responsive leadership. This broader lens would move the field closer to a more intersectional understanding of leadership sustainability in diverse educational contexts.

Conduct Longitudinal Studies on Leadership Sustainability

The participants' reflections in this study captured snapshots of endurance, yet their experiences are dynamic and evolving. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs that follow principals over time to trace how their motivations, resilience strategies, and community relationships shift across different phases of leadership.

A longitudinal phenomenological or mixed-methods study could examine how early-career principals build resilience, how mid-career leaders navigate burnout or renewal, and how veteran leaders transition toward mentorship and legacy. Tracking these trajectories over several years would illuminate how sustained leadership matures as both a personal and institutional process.

Explore the Impact of Culturally Responsive Leadership on School and Community Outcomes

While this study centered on the principals' lived experiences, future research could examine how their culturally responsive practices tangibly influence student achievement, teacher retention, and community engagement. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies might measure the ripple effects of culturally responsive leadership on school climate, disciplinary equity, and student belonging.

By connecting the human experiences of leadership to measurable school outcomes, future work could strengthen the empirical foundation for policy advocacy, demonstrating that culturally responsive leadership is both morally essential and operationally effective in driving sustained improvement.

Investigate Support Systems and Affinity Networks for Leaders of Color

Participants consistently described how mentorship, brotherhood, and community networks served as lifelines for their sustainability. Yet, formal structures supporting these networks remain limited. Future studies should examine how affinity-based leadership communities, such as regional principal networks or national associations for leaders of color, may affect retention and well-being.

Action research within such networks could provide valuable insight into how shared identity and collective reflection foster both personal and professional growth. This research

could also inform policy design by showing how districts and states might intentionally institutionalize these support structures rather than leaving them to develop informally.

Integrate Mixed-Methods and Participatory Approaches

Finally, future research might expand the methodological landscape by combining phenomenological inquiry with quantitative or participatory approaches. Mixed-methods designs could correlate leaders' qualitative experiences of resilience and moral purpose with measurable indicators such as retention rates or teacher satisfaction. Participatory research is the practice whereby principals co-design studies with scholars to democratize the production of knowledge and to align the research process with the relational and justice-oriented values at the heart of culturally responsive leadership. Such approaches would strengthen the validity of future studies while also modeling the kind of inclusive, community-engaged scholarship that reflects the very principles these leaders practice daily.

In essence, this study represents a beginning, not an endpoint. The participants' stories of faith, resistance, and legacy invite scholars to continue building theory and evidence that reflect the realities of leaders of color. Sustaining Black male principals is both an academic interest and a moral imperative for the future of equitable education. Future research must therefore continue to center their voices, expand their visibility, and transform their insights into systems that sustain generations of leaders to come.

Conclusion

This study began with a simple but urgent question: *What does it take for Black male principals to stay and to sustain excellence in urban schools that have historically worn down even the most committed leaders?* Through the lens of phenomenology, this question unfolded into a deeper exploration of identity, purpose, and endurance. The voices of the eight principals

who participated in this study offered their wisdom, revealing what it means to lead, love, and last in spaces often defined by systemic inequity.

At its core, this study sought to understand the lived experience of sustained leadership to uncover the essence of how Black men navigate the tension between personal calling and institutional constraint. What emerged was not a story of survival, but of transformation. The participants' journeys illuminate four interwoven themes: resisting deficit beliefs and stereotypes, building schools as community-centered spaces, sustaining leadership amid isolation and struggle, and leading with moral purpose and legacy. Together, these themes reveal a model of leadership that is both culturally grounded and spiritually fortified. Such a model of leadership is sustained by faith, community, and the enduring pursuit of justice.

The study's findings affirm that the sustainability of Black male principals is not merely about avoiding burnout or achieving longevity for its own sake. It is about *preserving purpose in the face of pressure* and *building legacies that outlive individual tenure*. Their leadership operates as a counter-narrative to the dominant story of principal turnover and school instability. These men transform endurance into resistance, and resistance into renewal. Their continued presence becomes an act of defiance against systems that often undervalue both their leadership and their students' potential.

The theoretical synthesis advanced in this study links Critical Race Theory, Resilience Theory, Transformational Leadership, and Culturally Responsive School Leadership to offer a new understanding of what sustainability looks like in practice. The proposed concept of the Sustained Leadership Mindset captures how moral purpose, communal grounding, and critical consciousness intertwine to sustain leaders through adversity. It reframes sustainability not as personal toughness but as a collective moral stance: the belief that justice and love are worth

staying for.

In practice, this study calls for reimagining the conditions that enable leadership longevity. Districts and preparation programs must move beyond recruiting diverse leaders to sustaining them through mentorship, reflection, and community. Policymakers must redefine accountability to encompass cultural and relational outcomes alongside performance metrics. And communities must continue to see their schools as shared spaces of hope where leaders, families, and students co-author new possibilities.

On a personal level, this research is also a testament to faith and legacy. The principals who participated in this study reminded me that leadership, at its highest form, is spiritual work. It is the daily decision to return, to recommit, and to rebuild because the children watching deserve consistency, not just inspiration. Their stories affirm that sustaining leadership is a form of justice. Personally, there is a quote that continues to resonate with me by James Baldwin: “The children are always ours, every single one of them...Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.” We as Black Male principals exemplify this quote and are leading in a new charge for the future of education in urban settings, and morally, we must do this work for our new generations.

Ultimately, this study contributes a deeper truth to the field of educational leadership: that sustainability is both the means and the message of equity. To sustain oneself as a leader is to resist erasure; to sustain others is to build a bridge toward freedom. The voices captured here echo beyond this dissertation; they invite us to imagine schools as communities of belonging, leadership as moral service, and persistence as a revolutionary act.

As this chapter closes, it does not signal an ending but a continuation. The essence of this study lives in the ongoing work of every leader who stays rooted in love and anchored in justice.

The principals in this study have shown that to sustain leadership is to sustain life in the community and to open the door for those who will come next. Their stories remind us that true transformation is not measured by the years one serves, but by the legacy one leaves behind.

References

- Allen, L. E. (2023). *Lead with C.A.R.E.: Strategies to build culturally competent and affirming schools*. Corwin Press.
- Anderson, J., & Thomas, R. (2019). *Racialized burnout in urban school leadership*. *Educational Leadership Journal*, 56(4), 231-245.
- Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. Free Press.
- Bass, B. M. (1998). *Transformational leadership: Industrial, military, and educational impact*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Psychology Press.
- Branch, G., Hanushek, E., & Rivkin, S. (2013). School leaders matter: Measuring the impact of effective principals. *Education Next*, 13(1), 62-69.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). NYU Press.
- Dolph, D. (2017). Challenges and opportunities for school improvement: Recommendations for urban school principals. *Education & Urban Society*, 49(4), 363–387.
- Fenwick, L. T. (2022). *Jim Crow's pink slip: The untold story of Black principal and teacher leadership*. Harvard Education Press.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. Jossey-Bass.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.

- Gladwell, M. (2019). Revisiting *Brown v. Board*: A conversation with Malcolm Gladwell. *Behavioral Scientist*. Retrieved from <https://behavioralscientist.org/conversation-malcolm-gladwell-revisiting-brown-v-board/>
- Gooden, M. A. (2012). What does racism have to do with leadership? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(3), 733–772.
- Gooden, M. (2012). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Routledge.
- Gooden, M. A. (2012). What does it mean to be a culturally responsive principal? *Journal of School Leadership*, 22(5), 798-820.
- Gooden, M. A., & Dantley, M. (2012). Centering race in leadership preparation. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(2), 246-291.
- Gu, Q., & Day, C. (2013). Challenges to teacher resilience: Conditions count. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(1), 22–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2011.623152>
- Johnson, L., & Williams, B. (2021). *Intersectionality in school leadership: Examining Black male principals through CRT and transformational leadership*. *Leadership in Education*, 18(2), 142-159.
- Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1272-1311.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316630383>
- Khalifa, M. A. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47–68.

https://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Toward+a+Critical+Race+Theory+of+Education

- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is Critical Race Theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7–24.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Racialized discourse and ethnic epistemologies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 257–277). Sage Publications.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3-12.
- <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X035007003>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Laughlin, D. A. (2023). *The process of becoming a culturally responsive school leader in high school* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia).
- Ledesma, J. (2014). Conceptual frameworks and research models on resilience in leadership. *SAGE Open*, 4(3), 1-8.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, 71(3), 543–562.
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 227–238.

- Masten, A. S. (2001). Resilience in development: A synthesis of research across five decades. In D. Cicchetti & D. J. Cohen (Eds.), *Developmental Psychopathology: Risk, Disorder, and Adaptation* (Vol. 3, pp. 739–795). John Wiley & Sons.
- Masten, A. S. (2014). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development*. Guilford Press.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *The condition of education 2020: Characteristics of public school principals*. U.S. Department of Education.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *The condition of education 2020: Characteristics of public school principals*. U.S. Department of Education.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2022). *Demographic characteristics of principals by region*. U.S. Department of Education.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Saldana, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Santamaría, L. J., & Santamaría, A. P. (2012). *Applied critical leadership in education: Choosing change*. Routledge.
- Smith, J., & Allen, T. (2020). *Mentorship programs for Black male principals: An emerging model for retention*. *Urban Education Journal*, 55(3), 290-308.
- Smith, W. A., Yosso, T. J., & Solórzano, D. G. (2006). Racial battle fatigue. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(1), 144-194.

- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical Race Methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44.
- Tillman, L. C. (2004). African American principals and the legacy of Brown. *Review of Research in Education*, 28, 101–146.
https://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=African+American+Principals+and+the+Legacy+of+Brown
- Tillman, L. C. (2004). (Un)Intended consequences? The impact of the Brown v. Board of Education decision on the employment status of Black educators. *Education and Urban Society*, 36(3), 280–303.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Walker, V. S. (2009). Second-class integration: A historical perspective for a contemporary agenda. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(2), 269–284.
- Woods, M., Paulus, T., Atkins, D. P., & Macklin, R. (2016). Advancing qualitative research using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS)? Reviewing potential versus practice in published studies using ATLAS.ti and NVivo, 1994–2013. *Social Science Computer Review*, 34(5), 597–617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439315596311>
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.

Appendix

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Informed Consent Form

Title of Study:

The Lived Experiences of Black Male Principals in Urban Midwestern Schools: Challenges, Rewards, and Culturally Responsive Leadership

Principal Investigator:

Name: Rodney Lynk Jr.

Department: University of Wisconsin-Madison

Degree Program: PhD in Educational Leadership

Email: rblynk@wisc.edu

Phone: 414-870-1661

Faculty Advisor (if applicable):

Name: Dr. SARA LYNN JIMENEZ SOFFA

Department: Educational Leadership Policy Analysis

Email: jimenezsoffa@wisc.edu

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Rodney Lynk Jr. as part of the requirements for the PhD in Educational Leadership at University of Wisconsin-Madison. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black male principals in urban Midwestern schools, specifically focusing on the challenges, rewards, and culturally responsive leadership practices they employ.

Purpose of the Study

The study aims to:

- Understand the experiences of Black male principals in urban schools.
- Examine the challenges and rewards influencing their retention in leadership positions.

- Explore how their leadership practices address the educational debt and opportunity gap for Black and Brown students.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to engage in:

1. An Interview

- A one-on-one, semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes via Zoom or in person.
- The interview will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

2. Optional Focus Group Discussion

- A 60–75-minute focus group with other Black male principals to discuss shared experiences.

3. Document Analysis

- Voluntary submission of leadership reflections, school improvement plans, or relevant documents.

Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. If you choose to withdraw, any collected data related to you will be immediately destroyed.

Potential Risks and Benefits

Risks:

- Some questions may cause emotional discomfort while discussing professional challenges.

- Minimal risk of breach of confidentiality (mitigated through pseudonyms and data security measures).

Benefits:

- Contribution to research on culturally responsive school leadership and equity in education.
- Findings may inform policies to improve the retention and support of Black male principals in urban schools.

Confidentiality

- Your identity will remain confidential. A pseudonym will be assigned to you in all study reports.
- All collected data (audio recordings, transcripts, and documents) will be stored on a password-protected device.
- Audio recordings will be deleted after transcription.
- Only the principal investigator and faculty advisor will have access to the raw data.

Compensation

There is no financial compensation for participating in this study.

Questions and Contact Information

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact:

- **Principal Investigator:** Rodney Lynk Jr. rblynk@wisc.edu, 414 870 1661
- **Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Sara Lynn Jimenez Soffa jimenezsoffa@wisc.edu
- **Institutional Review Board (IRB):** University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board (IRB)

If you have concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board (IRB) at HRPP@research.wisc.edu or by phone (608) 263-2362.

Consent Statement

I have read and understand the information provided above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I consent to having my interview audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Name: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your participation in this study!

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Title of Study:

Black Excellence Revealed: The Lived Experiences of Black Male Principals in Urban Midwestern Schools: Challenges, Rewards, and Culturally Responsive Leadership

Purpose:

This interview aims to gather insights into the experiences of Black male principals leading urban schools. The questions will explore leadership challenges, culturally responsive practices, retention factors, and the impact of leadership on student success.

Interview Structure

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your insights are invaluable to understanding the leadership experiences of Black male principals.
- I want to remind you that this interview is confidential. You are free to skip any question or withdraw at any time.
- With your consent, I will record this session for transcription purposes. Is that acceptable?

2. Background and Context (10 minutes)

1. Can you briefly describe your journey into educational leadership?
2. What motivated you to become a principal in an urban school?
3. How long have you been in your current role, and what drew you to this specific school or district?

3. Leadership Experiences and Challenges (15–20 minutes)

4. What have been the most significant challenges you have faced as a Black male principal in this setting?
5. How do you perceive the impact of systemic racism or bias on your leadership journey?
6. Can you describe a time when you had to advocate for your students or staff in response to inequitable policies or practices?

7. How do you manage the emotional labor associated with being a Black leader in a predominantly Black and Brown student population?

4. Culturally Responsive Leadership (15 minutes)

8. In what ways do you incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership into your school's vision and daily operations?
9. How do you affirm the cultural identities of Black and Brown students within your school?
10. What role do community and family engagement play in your leadership approach?
11. How do you empower teachers and staff to implement culturally responsive practices in their classrooms?

5. Rewards and Retention (15 minutes)

12. What aspects of your role bring you the greatest sense of fulfillment and purpose?
13. What motivates you to continue in this position despite the challenges?
14. Have mentorship, professional networks, or peer support influenced your decision to stay in leadership? If so, how?
15. How do you envision the role of Black male principals in addressing the opportunity gap and educational debt owed to Black and Brown students?

6. Looking Ahead - Future Policies (10 minutes)

16. What strategies do you believe could improve the retention of Black male principals in urban school settings?
17. How can district leaders and policymakers better support principals like yourself?
18. What advice would you give to emerging Black male leaders pursuing school administration?

7. Closing

- Thank you for sharing your experiences and perspectives. Your voice is essential in shaping research that can inform better policies and support systems for school leaders.
- Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?
- (Stop recording and express gratitude.)