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# Educating as a Vocation: A Phenomenological Study of Womanist Educational Leaders

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Educating as a Vocation: A Phenomenological Study of Womanist Educational Leaders

by  
Aisha Ali Moore

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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2016

## Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Aisha Ali Moore under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

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Name

March 6, 2016

Date

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## Abstract

Educating as a Vocation: A Phenomenological Study of Womanist Educational Leaders. Aisha Ali Moore, 2016: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler School of Education. ERIC Descriptors: African-American Leadership, At Risk Students, Educational Methods, Feminism, Leadership Effectiveness

The problem is that little is known about the life experiences and womanist characteristics of African-American female school leaders and how these experiences and characteristics have collectively influenced their leadership skills and practices within American schools. The phenomenological study sought to understand and describe the lived experiences of African-American female educational leaders who embody womanist characteristics and to identify how the following five factors have influenced their practices in educational leadership: (a) activism, (b) the knowledge and acceptance of multiple identities, (c) the usage of motherwit and othermothering (d) the care-ethic, and (e) the breaking of barriers.

A purposive sample of African-American women who are educational leaders in urban school districts with predominately racial and ethnic minority student populations in the southwestern and southern parts of the country were used in this study. Data was analyzed to answer the following three research questions: (a) What do the characteristics of womanism mean to African-American female educational leaders?, (b) What perceived role do womanist characteristics have in the professional practices and leadership-styles of African-American female educational leaders?, and (c) What elements of womanism influence the African-American female educational leader's efforts in helping to close the achievement gap experienced by many students of color?

The study was conducted using an explanatory, qualitative style based on a phenomenological methodology. Participants completed telephone and face-to-face interviews. The four female participants (a) have held educational leadership positions, (b) are between the ages of 30 and 80, and (c) are African-American.

This research can be a source of information and motivation to all women who aspire to become educational leaders, specifically African-American women who serve or desire to serve minority students in urban schools. The analysis revealed the nine themes: A mentor is a must, teacher leadership, activism, overcoming stereotypes, a strong sense of self, a vocation, breaking barriers, care, and high expectations.

## Table of Contents

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Statement of Purpose .....	1
Nature of the Problem .....	2
Topic .....	3
Historical Perspective on Womanism .....	5
The Research Problem .....	12
Description of the Study's Setting .....	16
Deficiencies in the Evidence .....	16
Audience .....	17
Definition of Terms .....	17
Purpose of the Study .....	19
Contents of the Study .....	20
 Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	 22
Theoretical Framework .....	22
Multiple Identities, Circular Consciousness, and Intersectionality .....	24
The Womanist: Othermothering, Motherline, and Motherwit .....	26
Educating to Transgress .....	30
Womanism and Activism .....	32
Womanism and the Ethic of Care .....	38
National School Leadership Standards .....	43
Complementary Leadership Skills .....	47
Educational Leadership .....	49
Methodology Used in Prior Research .....	51
Summary of Literature Review .....	52
Research Questions .....	55
 Chapter 3: Methodology .....	 57
Research Design and Rationale .....	57
Phenomenological Approach .....	58
Instruments .....	60
Setting .....	62
Participants .....	64
Recruitment .....	65
Ethical Considerations .....	66
Data Collection .....	67
Researcher Bias .....	68
Procedures .....	69
Analysis and Synthesis of the Data .....	71
In-Depth Explanation of Analysis and Synthesis of the Data .....	73
Limitations .....	74
 Chapter 4: Results .....	 76

Introduction .....	76
Participant Demographics and Background Information .....	78
Presentation of Findings .....	83
Narrative Summary of Findings for Research Question 1 .....	88
Discussion of Participants' Narrative Data.....	97
Narrative Summary of Findings for Research Question 2.....	98
Discussion of Participants' Narrative Data.....	112
Narrative Summary of Findings for Research Question 3.....	113
Discussion of Participants' Narrative Data.....	121
Summary.....	122
 Chapter 5: Discussion .....	 123
Introduction.....	123
Findings and Interpretations .....	124
Central Question .....	149
Implications of Findings .....	150
Recommendations for Future Research .....	152
Limitations .....	153
 References.....	 155
 Appendices	
A Principal Researcher's Experience with the Phenomenon .....	171
B Personal Interview Protocol and Questioning Format.....	177
C Overall Study Themes .....	187
 Tables	
1 Theme Tallies.....	84
2 Evidence Supporting Themes Related to Research Question 1 .....	85
3 Evidence Supporting Themes Related to Research Question 2.....	86
4 Evidence Supporting Themes Related to Research Question 3.....	87

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Despite the education reform efforts across the United States, urban schools continue to experience low student performance as a result of issues confronting students and those charged with their education (Morales, 2010; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Williams-Boyd & Sweeten, 2011). Effective leadership is a critical factor in increasing student achievement within schools that serve challenging school populations (Durden, 2008; Jacobson, 2010; Morales, 2010; Schulte, Slate, & Onwuegbuzie, 2010; Williams-Boyd & Sweeten, 2011). School leaders in urban schools have responsibilities that are both challenging and multifaceted (Cistone & Stevenson, 2000), and their ability to be successful in this environment requires exemplary leadership skills. Leadership is deemed as an explicatory variable in schools where students meet rigorous learning objectives, and leadership impact is greater in schools with more difficult circumstances and where the academic needs of students is heightened (Durden, 2008). Taylor and La Cava (2011) discussed leadership goals in urban schools:

Annual accountability for students' continual gains in achievement is a focus of school leaders in districts and schools, particularly in urban areas. Urban principals often have the goal of making dramatic changes in schools for students to reach learning goals. (p. 224)

Despite the national focus on increasing student achievement, there continues to be an achievement gap facing students in urban schools (Bromberg & Theokas, 2013; Lake & Hernandez, 2011; McKown, 2013). In the United States, "for many Americans, the term urban school evokes an image of a dilapidated school building in a poor inner-city neighborhood populated with African American or Hispanic children" (Jacob, 2007, p. 130). The data taken from the Schools and Staffing Survey 2003-04, a nationally

representative survey overseen by the United States Department of Education, confirms that urban schools do have large populations of African-American students who live in locations synonymous with poverty (Jacob, 2007).

The effective schools research, conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, identified and underscored characteristics of school climate believed to improve student achievement (Duke, 1987). In related studies, it was noted that student learning is directly related to the realities brought through ethnicity, race, and poverty yet is substantially mediated by effective leadership (Gaynor, 2012; Williams-Boyd & Sweeten, 2011). As Yoeli and Berkovich (2010) contended, visionary leaders have the capacity to overcome related challenges and promote learning for all students. The effective school research credited site leaders for creating safe and orderly school environments, setting clear learning and behavioral objectives, and identifying high performance goals (Jacobson & Bezzina, 2008). In addition to sight leadership, skillful instructional leaders are also essential in efforts to improve school climate and student achievement (Hoy, 2012; Mulford & Silins, 2011; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012; Schmidt, 2010).

### **Nature of the Problem**

As a result of the educator's increased accountability for student achievement, site leaders focus on being transformational educators who motivate, assist, and direct students to meet state-mandated expectations and close achievement gaps (Cook, 2012; Sammons, Gu, Day, & Ko, 2010; Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2010). School leaders must be culturally aware and understand the needs of all children in their school (Gaynor, 2010; Hansuvadha & Slater, 2010).

This principal researcher's study is grounded in personal experience and commitment (see Appendix A), and the concept that Gaynor (2010) described as "holistic

improvement” (p. 31), which involves the belief that numerous influences contribute to student achievement. Gaynor described holistic improvement as a factor that is “perhaps systematically related to culture and to the objective realities of race, ethnicity, wealth, and poverty” (p. 31). Hansuvadha and Slater (2012) similarly called for the successful education of all students “in a way that adds to, rather than subtracts from, cultural identity” (p. 175). The lagging achievement of African-American students underscores the necessity to examine leadership practices of those who have successfully dedicated their careers to serving the African-American student body to gain a better understanding of what they do to achieve success.

One group of school leaders who have met success are African-American female leaders, who often lead in nontraditional ways, following a tradition labeled *womanism*. Uncovering the essence of what it means to be a womanist educational leader in schools serving at-risk students, and developing an understanding of how these very special women lead, will contribute to serving the African-American student population in better ways.

### **Topic**

An overlooked solution to underachievement may be that of *womanism*. Rooted in African-American political and historical tradition, this term was coined to represent the commitment of African-American females to cultural distinctiveness and integrity with the desire to promote the “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Given its fundamental elements, womanism offers a framework for use in addressing educational reform involving effective educational leadership both inside and outside of the classroom. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) described classroom teachers, some of whom are destined to become teacher leaders and site administrators:

Amidst these calls for teacher transformation have been examples of the types of teachers who are effective. Striking about such portrayals is that a number of these exemplars are Black women, which I believe is more than coincidence. I believe that researchers have come across a womanist tradition of caring that extends throughout the history of African American women. (p. 72)

For the young people of diverse ethnicities and races, a caring voice is needed to speak of these children's experiences in order to assist others in understanding their needs and to enable them to become self-motivated (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Roseboro & Ross, 2009; Turner, 2004). African-American students need leaders, both formal and informal, in the field of education who are not afraid to challenge the system (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Berry, 2005; Collins, 1996, 2000). In other words, these students need to see those who have walked the roads they have yet to travel.

African-American educators' pedagogy has been connected to the success of African-American students (Foster, 1997; Irvine, 2002; Siddle-Walker, 2000). Therefore, these educators, who embody the womanist tradition by representing what it means to be a self-actualized person of color, need to be (a) highly visible, (b) informed citizens, and (c) overcomers of prejudice in its varying forms (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005). Most importantly, these individuals need to reflect concern for the advancement of all people.

School staff members with honest and ethical intentions are vital to the success of children's educational experiences (Cranston, 2010). However, it is important for students to see someone like themselves in positions of influence (Ankoanda, 2007). In many schools, the staffing patterns do not include African-Americans or other minorities in positions of direct influence (Ankoanda, 2007; Roseboro & Ross, 2009; Turner, 2004). Often, the teachers and administrators are Caucasian while "only the janitors and cafeteria workers are African American" (Ankoanda, 2007, p. 3).

## Historical Perspective on Womanism

Americans have witnessed their share of public displays of unity. One of the earliest demonstrations occurred on March 3, 1913, when approximately 8,000 women gathered as a group and marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC, for the right to vote. In this group, there were women representing all ages, classes, religions, and races. It was the minority group, however, that brought about a bit of controversy and discomfort that day. Hundreds of African-American women in this march were forced to accompany the group in a segregated unit behind the other marchers. As a result, the events of that day brought about a climactic change within the women's suffrage movement.

Initially, the progenitors of the movement, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth C. Stanton, believed in the natural rights of full citizenship for women, including the right to vote. When that reality was not to be achieved by middle-class White women, who were at that time placed in a similar category as African-American women and men, the suffrage philosophy began to change. Susan B. Anthony stated, "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman" (Wilson & Russell, 1996, para. 4). There were also many suffragists who pushed for the rights of White women solely in an attempt to help maintain White dominance in politics. According to Weems (1993), a conservative suffrage leader was quoted saying the following:

There is but one way to avert danger. Cut off the vote of the slums and give it to [White] women . . . the usefulness of women suffrage as a counterbalance to the foreign vote, and as a means of legally preserving White supremacy in the South. (p. 46)

This pivotal moment in women's history made it apparent that, although the women

shared gender issues, the experiences of racial and ethnic minority women were, and are, significantly different from those of the Caucasian majority. Feminism, which grew out of this movement, though well intended, has not really embraced or represented the needs of women of color (Comas-Diaz, 2008; Marbley, 2005). Consequently, African-American women suffered two generations in their quest to garner the right to vote, well beyond the passing of the woman suffrage amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Shaw, 1999).

As a result of the suffrage movement, African-American women were compelled to find a way to tell their own stories and place their experiences in a theoretical perspective unique to their understanding. Feminism did not meet this need for African-American women. While the movement did address female issues, the perspective did not address the other areas of discrimination faced by the African-American woman. Consequently, this led author and educator Walker (1983), to coin the term *womanism*. The term was first used in the 1979 short story, *Coming Apart*. This short story chronicled the husband's use of pornography, how it affected the marriage, and his wife's attempt to make him understand how his choices hurt her. Walker (1983) wrote, "The wife has never considered herself a feminist—though she is, of course, a womanist. A womanist is a feminist, only more common" (p. 7). The story reveals how the life of a common African-American woman is impacted by sexism, racism, and classism and how she is able to transform her environment while liberating herself and her partner. By doing so, she is labeled by her husband as *womanish*, a distinction that means connotatively behaving grown, in charge, or as one's mother and other women of esteem within the African-American community. The term is found again in Walker's nationally acclaimed essay, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Walker (1981) also used the term

in the essay, *Gift of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson*. In this essay, Walker discussed the life of Rebecca Jackson, a leader within the Shaker religion who left her husband and family to follow a life of celibacy and holiness.

When Walker (1983) wrote about womanism, she did so in a way that gave the term everyday connections (Phillips, 2006). The term was less limiting than feminism and superseded academic borders (Phillips, 2006). The term made the lives and contributions of the common or ordinary woman of color important, noteworthy, and transformative. Walker (1983) introduced a new way of viewing and analyzing women's issues, struggles, relationships, and concentrations. Taking the elements of womanism into account, it becomes evident that it is a framework that takes into consideration the merging together of experience, awareness, and action (Banks-Wallace, 2000).

As described by Williams (1987), Walker's (1983) prescribed meaning of womanism is actually Black feminism. Both theoretical frameworks are related, yet different. Womanism, like Black feminism, gave women of color a framework around which to write, think, and talk about their experiences (Burrow, 1998). Yet, the naming of womanism is an example of one of the elements that contributes to this theoretical perspective and separates the perspective from Black feminism. Unlike Black feminism, the term was created by an African-American woman, and thus its foundation was embedded within the community. African-American women began claiming ownership over their own stories. Maparyan (2011) wrote, "An advantage of using 'womanist' is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn't preface it with the word 'Black'...since Blackness is implicit in the term" (p. 17). Additionally, not only did womanism focus on the oppression of women, but the term also included the fight against all subjugation and inequality.

Over time, other researchers, such as Hamlet (2000) and Phillips (2006), took Walker's (1993) womanism a step further. As Hamlet suggested, womanism is, "a more holistic understanding of African American women, their history, culture, and lived experiences, thereby instilling and/or enhancing a rhetoric of self-affirmation and self-healing" (p. 424). While Walker is known more widely for coining the term womanism, there are two others who have been found to have contributed to the creation and evolution of the framework: Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems.

**Africana womanism.** The idea of womanism began to invade the academic, political, and literary climate during the 1970s and 1980s, when another scholar and progenitor of a similar theoretical framework, but with a different name, was recognized to have coined the term as well (Maparyan, 2011). Hudson-Weems introduced the concept of *Africana womanism* in 1988 (Maparyan, 2011). According to Hudson-Weems (as cited in Maparyan, 2011), her concept of womanism is separate from that of Walker's. Africana womanism was first noted in Hudson-Weems's 2004 book, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, where she claims to have first introduced the term and idea during a conference by the National Council of Black Studies. Hudson-Weems also began preparing and planning the framework in two papers: "The Tripartite Plight" and "Black Womanism vs. Black Feminism: A Critical Issue for Human Survival" (Maparyan, 2011).

Although not a complete contrast to Walker's (1983) womanism, Hudson-Weems's (2004) concept of the framework had many similarities amidst the differences. As with Walker, Hudson-Weems stated that African-American women should "create their own paradigm and name and define themselves" (p. 369). She wrote, "I have relentlessly insisted that self-naming and self-defining are at the very core of authentic

existence. I issued the initial call for this important prerequisite for Black women's survival and by extension, Black survival" (Phillips, 2006, p. xix).

However, unlike Walker (1983), Hudson-Weems (2004) took a more independent approach to her perspective. She claimed that Africana womanism is not feminism. Hudson-Weems's rationale lies in the history of feminism and the women's suffrage movement. During the early stages of the movement, both White women and African-American men were included; African-American women were excluded as the movement grew. Enfranchisement for White women was threatened due to the establishment of the 15th Amendment, and dissention became inevitable. As a result, the early feminist movement did not advocate for the rights of African-American women; the movement primarily focused on the equal treatment of White women. Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison summed up Hudson-Weems's concerns when she said, "The early image of Women's Lib was of an elitist organization made up of upper-middle-class women with the concerns of that class and not paying much attention to the problem of most Black women" (Hudson-Weems, 2008, 37).

Hudson-Weems's (2004) Africana womanism centers on gender-based oppression, differs from feminism, and slightly differs from Walker's (1983) concept of womanism. According to Hudson-Weems (2004), relations between African-American women and African-American men are different than those between White women and White men. For African-American women, the men in their community are not seen as oppressors; rather they are seen as partners in the fight for the greater cause of racial equality. Hudson-Weems contended that racism, classism, and economic injustice supersede sexism (Maparyan, 2011). Ladner (1971), an Africana sociologist, asserted that "Black women do not perceive their enemy to be Black men, but rather the enemy is

considered to be oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate Black men, women, and children” (pp. 277-78). Conversely, it appears that Walker (1983) viewed all forms of oppression as having equal importance, regardless of how many classes are impacted.

**African womanism.** Ogunyemi (1985) also addressed the concept of womanism by stating, “I arrived at the term ‘womanism’ independently and was pleasantly surprised to discover that my notion of its meaning overlaps with Alice Walker’s” (p. 28). The concept of womanism is one that began to find its way to the African-American female scholar during the 19th century. It was during this time that the culture of academia appeared to be open and ready to receive a new perspective that spoke solely of the African-American female experience through her eyes and with her voice. Not only did the perspective surface in collegiate classrooms, a home was also established in the literature. One scholar who recognized this was Ogunyemi. Around the same time Walker (1983) coined the phrase womanism, it appears that Ogunyemi was doing the same; however, her focus centered on the evolution of the framework in African and African-American literature. Ogunyemi defined her distinction:

As a group, they are distinct from the White feminist culture because of their race. They have experienced the past and present subjugation of the Black population along with present-day subtle (or not so subtle) control exercised over them by the alien Western Culture. (p. 22)

These differences allowed women to understand the feminist plight; yet the fight of the African-American woman is more complex and far reaching.

Although Ogunyemi (1985) focused on literature, she also had a plethora of comparisons with both Hudson-Weems (2004) and Walker (1983). As did Hudson-Weems and Walker, Ogunyemi understood that the plight of the African-American

woman is very complex, considering she has to battle sexism, racism, and economic deprivation. Additionally, like both Hudson-Weems and Walker, Ogunyemi understood that an African-American woman's intent is not to belittle or battle the African-American man, but to support and work alongside him in order to uplift the community. "She believes in him; hence her books end in integrative images of the male and female world. ...[African female authors] share all or nearly all the problems of the male African writers" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 26). The understanding of the role men play with women separated Black feminism from womanism for both Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi (as cited in Maparyan, 2011) and, even though all three progenitors agree with this concept, Walker's views are not as direct.

To further show the importance of the concept of both genders working together for a betterment of humanity, Ogunyemi (1985) renamed her perspective African womanism in 1996. This was done because, "African-American womanism overlooks African peculiarities" (Maparyan, 2011, p. 24). One of those peculiarities is the concentration on conflict resolution being a collaborative effort instead of gender-specific. It is based on the term *wo/man palava*, which refers to a problem that is partly based on sexual characteristics involving men and women. Maparyan (2011) explained:

Thus, in African womanism, the *wo/man palava* concept is a central thematic concept justifying Black women as leaders in organizing, mediating, reconciling, and healing a world overrun with conflict, violence, and dehumanization...In this vein, womanism is not about women's issues; rather, it concerns global reorganization and healing...[their] perspective encompasses all oppressed people, men included; as a human problem... (p. 25)

This myth connects to Ogunyemi's African womanism because it focuses not only on collaborative work, but also on the power the woman has in order to bring about change and harmony. In a way, it parallels both Hudson-Weems's and Walker's idea of the

woman being dominant instead of passive in the face of all inhumane treatment.

Womanism originated from a foundation that asserts, regardless of age, marital status, economic circumstances, sexual preference, religion, or profession, all African-American women share a common cultural experience, and there are specific themes that mold African-American women's rhetoric and rhetorical behavior. The themes are (a) generations of struggle against racism, sexism, and classism; (b) the battle against invisibility, silencing, and the fight to obliterate the controlling images that continue to belittle them; (c) the interdependence of reflection and action whereby education and political activism are conjoined; (d) empowerment within their everyday life; (e) the importance of naming and telling of one's experience in the world (f); the role of spirituality in fighting and dealing with oppression (g); the dominant and central role of the woman in combating oppressive forces (h); and the importance of working together with all others in order to create a global society where everyone thrives and survives (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 2000; Comas-Diaz, 2008; Giles, 2006; Hamlet, 2000; Ogunyemi, 1985; Weems, 1993). As Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) asserted, Womanism represents some of the best traditions to be born out of Black women's experiences of struggle, endurance, and establishment.

### **The Research Problem**

In contrast to Ankoanda's (2007) position involving the importance of more balanced staffing patterns, the education field has a historical and large gap in the representation of African-Americans in leadership positions. In 2007-08, 81% of school principals within the United States were non-Hispanic White, while 11% were non-Hispanic Black (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011c). Similar statistics were noted when considering classroom teachers who were classified as teacher leaders:

During the 2007-2008 academic years, only 7% were non-Hispanic Black (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011c). Four years later, during the 2011-2012 school year, no meaningful change had occurred in the demographic ratios of principals and only 7% of teacher leaders were non-Hispanic Black (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011c).

However, there has been a change regarding the students who make up America's school system. From fall 2002 through fall 2012, the number of White students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools decreased from 28.6 million to 25.4 million, and their share of public school enrollment decreased from 59 to 51 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Additional studies from the Center for Public Education (2012) show that

trends in immigration and birth rates indicate that soon there will be no majority racial or ethnic group in the United States—no one group that makes up more than fifty percent of the total population. Already almost one in ten U.S. counties has a population that is more than fifty percent minority. (para. 9)

The population of students within the American school system is increasingly composed of children of color (Center for Public Education, 2012). It is projected that by 2023, African-American, Asian, Latino, and Native American students together will outnumber non-Hispanic White students in kindergarten through Grade 12 public schools by 50.5% to 45.1% (Infographics: A New Majority in K-12 Schools, 2014).

**Student performance.** Throughout the United States, African-American students of all ages and grade levels are underachieving academically. At the onset of their educational experience of the four largest racial and ethnic groups, African-American children “start with the lowest scores and show the smallest gains” (Do race/ethnicity-based student achievement gaps grow over time?, 2012, p. 2). Although African-

American students have made some initial strides in narrowing the gap, research indicates that the gap still remains. As cited by Do race/ethnicity-based student achievement gaps grow over time? (2012), in 2011,

Hispanic and African American high school graduates met ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks in English, reading, mathematics, and science at substantially lower rates than did Asian and White graduates. [Additionally] the rate of White graduates who were college ready in English (77%) was twice that of their African American peers (35%). (p. 2).

In each year from 1990 to 2013, the status dropout rate was lower for Whites than for Blacks (National Center for School Statistics, 2015).

Additionally, African-American males are achieving at far lower rates than African-American females. Both are behind Caucasians and other racial and ethnic subgroups when college attendance and graduation rates are compared, and statistics are more unfavorable when only considering African-American males (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). For example, the 2009 graduation rate for African-American males was 45%, comparing poorly with that of Caucasian males reflecting a 70% graduation rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). "Between October 2007 and October 2008, Black and Hispanic students in public and private high schools had higher event dropout rates than White students" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010, para. 4). In reading, higher percentages of White and Asian/Pacific Islander students than Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and multi-racial students reached the *proficient* level or above in 2013 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a). "The White-Black score gap in reading was wider in 2013 than in 1992. Additionally, in both subjects, White and Asian/Pacific Islander students scored higher on average than Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students in 2013" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013b, para. 1). The event dropout rate was 6.4% for African-

Americans and 5.3% for Hispanics; these rates were notably above the 2.3% dropout rate for Caucasians (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Furthermore, African-American males are more likely to be (a) placed within the lowest academic tracks, (b) closely controlled more often, and (c) the victims of unconstructive stereotyping by teachers (Morales, 2010; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Uwah et al., 2008).

Performance of Grade 4 students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress supports similar concerns. On the 2000 assessment, for example, only 12% of African-Americans, compared with 40% of Whites, scored at or above grade level in reading (Davis, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Seven years later, the average mathematics scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrated that scores for African-American students were lower than those for all other racial and ethnic subgroups (Battle, 2009; Coppersmith, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). In 2011, after an additional four years had passed, a 25-point gap existed between African-American and Caucasian students in the area of mathematics (Buckley, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a). Additionally, schools in Atlanta, GA, and the District of Columbia reported larger score gaps among their African-American and Caucasian students than other large urban school districts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a).

**Challenges within urban schools.** Although the aforementioned statistics represent Grade 4 students from schools across the nation, many of these young people are products of the country's urban school systems (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001, 2007, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). Urban schools are usually associated with low student performance as a result of the list of issues confronting students and those charged with their education (Morales, 2010; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Williams-Boyd &

Sweeten, 2011). According to Noguera (2003), related issues include the following:

Low test scores, low grades, high drop-out rates, poor attendance, generally unmotivated students, burned-out and ineffective teachers, dilapidated and unsafe buildings, administrations hopelessly mired in politicized and inefficient bureaucracies, and an endless series of reforms that never seem to lead to genuine improvement. (p. 3)

Educators often are not equipped to address the social, political, and economic circumstances impacting the lives of urban students (Buendía, 2011; Noel, 2010; Williams-Boyd & Sweeten, 2011). The blame is beginning to fall on educators (Jacobson, 2010; Jones & Egley, 2009; Neild & Balfanz, 2009). Howell, West, and Peterson (2007) reported that “roughly two-thirds of the United States adult population support replacing teachers and/or principals at persistently failing schools, and only one in ten opposes such options” (p. 16).

### **Description of the Study’s Setting**

All of the participants in the research study serviced elementary and high schools in metropolitan areas across the United States. The schools’ populations consisted of mostly ethnic and racial minority students whose families have been negatively impacted by poverty and crime. As a result, the students struggled to close the achievement gap that seems to plague the country’s educational system. This study included interviews with a selected group of African-American female educational leaders who were providing services for the aforementioned schools.

### **Deficiencies in the Evidence**

During the research for this study, there was a scarcity of information available in reference to educational leadership and African-American female leaders (Bloom & Erlandson, 2004; Loder, 2005a. According to Turner (2004), “...there continues to be a void that fails to include the lived stories and experiences of the principalship from

female voices that can inform others about pertinent issues of leadership in education” (p. 6). Moreover, research on African-American female educators involving womanism and its relationship to education was sparse and “ignored by much of the academic theorizing and research in education, as they were never the center around which the conservative projects of dominant femininity and teaching were developed” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, p. 437).

### **Audience**

The principal researcher intended to add to the body of literature on womanism by examining the ways in which education and this theoretical perspective may be interrelated. In addition, the principal researcher attempted to acknowledge, appreciate, and inform others within the field of education about the African-American female educational leader and how her lived experiences have a direct influence on her quest for equality and academic success for all students. “Taken together, these womanist concerns offer guidance for how a largely female and traditionally feminine teaching force might become the critically thinking and socially just educators our students and society need” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, p. 443). More directly, it was expected that this research would also inform and impact the educational leaders and educators in the public school district in which this study took place. Finally, the results of this study’s results were intended to shed light on how leaders in the public school arena can most effectively impact the educational experience of their students.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are defined as they applied to this study.

**African-American/Black/person of color.** To aid this course of research, the interchangeable terms African-American, Black, or person of color relate to those

individuals who self-identify as such and who have a family history in the United States.

**Educational leader.** This term refers to those who work within the field of education as consultants and district and building level leaders.

**Motherwit.** The literature referred to *motherwit* as the individual and shared wisdom derived from African-American women's lived experiences, a wisdom that provides counternarratives to hegemonic and academic accounts of truth and possibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). This wisdom was a way for African-American mothers and othermothers, who were aware of the objectification of Black womankind, to feed their daughters and other younger women within their community with the tactical nourishment needed to outwit oppressive forces (King & Ferguson, 2011).

**Multiple consciousness.** Multiple consciousness is an African-American woman's incessant awareness of how the twofold and systematic discriminations of racism and sexism, with the compounding of class inequality, impact her life daily.

**Othermothers.** The use of this term refers to African-American female educators in particular who take on the role of surrogate parent and communicate feelings of kinship with their African-American students (Case, 1997).

**Womanism.** "Despite the fact that U.S. Black women, in particular, have expended considerable energy on naming Black women's knowledge, definitional tensions not only persist but encounter changing political climates riddled with new obstacles" (Collins, 2000, p. 21). However, for the sake of this research *womanism*, also sometimes used interchangeably with *Black feminism*, is the concern for the fight against sexism, racism, and class inequality by Black women who are themselves part of the black community's efforts to attain justice and independence (Omolade, 1994).

Although both terms essentially encompass similar concepts, the differentiation of

the two has its foundation in the transformation experienced by African-American women throughout history. Therefore, these very different women unified under the umbrella of race, created different terms to describe their experiences. For the purpose of this research, there was a single definition to describe both terms. However, in an effort to acknowledge difference and to grasp the fullness of the research it should be understood that for many women, *womanism* a more nationalistic term seeks to separate the women of color's experience from those of White women. It is a means to clearly speak her truth without being overshadowed by the concerns of others (Collins, 1996). Alternately, *Black feminism* is a term that asks African-American women to look at how the particular assemblage of concerns affecting Black women in the United States are part of the concerns of women's emancipation struggles in general (Collins, 1996).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the lived experiences of African-American female educational leaders who embodied womanist characteristics and to identify how the following five factors have influenced their practices in educational leadership: (a) activism, (b) the knowledge and acceptance of multiple identities, (c) the usage of motherwit and othermothering (d) the care-ethic, and (e) the breaking of barriers. For years, the African-American woman's experience has been told by someone other than herself, yet it is imperative that she explain her own stories. Based on these stories and the potential influence it has on school leaders of diverse populations, the researcher's contention was that a more holistic understanding could be acquired involving the role that womanist theory plays in the lives of these successful educational leaders who exemplified related characteristics within their lives and profession (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Martin, 2010). DeLaney and Rogers (2004)

explained the importance of leadership roles for Black women:

Given that there is a political force driving Black women's leadership, it becomes critical to understand why and how Black women learn...in spite of racist, class-based, and sexist barriers, to advocate for the needs of the Black community within established White, sociopolitical organizations. Understanding this process will enable... education programs to rectify existing educational practices that marginalize Black women and to create ones that address...learning goals and capacities of emerging Black women leaders. (p. 93)

### **Contents of the Study**

Chapter 1 provides information on the principal researcher's background. It gives a brief overview on the history of womanism and describes how the principal researcher positions herself on the topic. Additionally, this chapter states the purpose of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature spanning various disciplines regarding womanism, educational leadership, and leadership standards within the realm of education. The concept of womanism, which is also known as Black feminism, crosses into many disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, theology, education, and sociology. In order to connect womanist theory and leadership, the literature review focused on the similarities in goals of both constructs and how womanism lends itself to educational leadership. Chapter 3 identifies the use of interview inquiry as the primary method of data collection and analysis for this explanatory research study. Duke (as cited in Creswell, 2007) stated, "I assume that human experience makes sense to those who live it and that human experience can be consciously expressed" (p. 227).

Chapter 4 discloses data generated from the interviews of the participants. In Chapter 5, the principal researcher discusses the findings in the context of the literature. Additionally, this chapter discusses any problems with data and data collection. Moreover, considerations have been made in regard to the implications the research may have on the two fields of womanist theory and educational research. The principal

researcher also reflects on how this research has and will impact her own experience in leadership, and she deliberates on the range and limitations of this study and the possibilities for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The review of the literature is presented in six thematic sections. Section 1 provides an historical overview of womanism, which serves as the theoretical perspective of this study. Section 2 provides research on women of color and multiple identities, and intersectionality. Section 3 focuses on motherwit, the phenomena of othermothering, and the motherline. Section 4 is an overview on womanism and activism. Section 5 addresses educational leadership standards, educational leadership, and the womanist educational leader. Section 6 details the research studies that supported the methodology and includes a summary that highlights the literature and its connection to the study's problem, purpose, and proposed research methods.

The following served as key terms: (a) Black feminism, (b) Black women and activism, (c) Black women and the ethic of care, (d) Black women in educational leadership, (e) Black women and other mothering, (f) circular consciousness, (g) feminism, (h) intersectionality, (i) motherwit, (j) multiple consciousness, (k) multiple identities, (l) sexism and educational leadership, (m) sexism and leadership, (n) womanism, (o) womanism and identity, and (o) womanism and leadership. Additionally, the following databases were utilized in order to gain access to literature: (a) ProQuest, (b) ERIC, (c) Google Scholar, and (d) Wilson Web. Finally, this review of literature incorporates a multidisciplinary approach by evaluating literature from the following disciplines: (a) business, (b) education, (c) history, (d) philosophy, (e) religion, and (f) sociology.

### **Theoretical Framework**

There are a plethora of frameworks used to ground studies on women and African-American women. For example, there is the feminist theoretical approach, which

takes into consideration women's fights to (a) eliminate patriarchal perceptions of females, (b) centralize women and their concerns, and (c) to place significance on women's thoughts and actions (Banks-Wallace, 2000). There is the Afrocentric perspective, which is a perspective that takes into consideration those living as a member of a racially oppressed community along with the group's self-determining system of beliefs and consciousnesses (Banks-Wallace, 2000). However, the feminist and the Afrocentric perspectives individually encompass a component of the African-American woman's reality and address them separately as well. Womanism is a holistic theoretical perspective that takes into consideration the interconnectedness of the African-American female experience as both being female and a woman of color (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Collins, 2000; Phillips, 2006; Sheared, 1994; Vaz, 2006).

Utilized by other African-American female scholars, the term womanist was more notably applied by Walker (1983) in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*. Womanism is a theoretical framework situated in a specific philosophical perspective that was created by and for the African-American female (Collins, 2000). The African-American woman's ability to summarize and verbalize her individual experiences in daily life as a self-defined, cooperative perspective is essential to her survival (Banks-Wallace, 2000). It also recognizes the social construction of Black womanhood through the context of slavery, segregation, gender, race, class, and sexuality (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Sheared, 1994; Vaz, 2006). Additionally, womanism distinguishes the unique vantage point African-American women possess as a result of the convergence of these various oppressions in her life (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). As a result, Walker's womanism provides a realm in which to (a) distinguish the distinctiveness of the African-American women's experiences, (b) express the differences

and similarities among women of color, and (c) articulate clearly the link between African-American men and women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Moreover, the ability to recognize the bonds between different communities of people as well as working to get rid of all types of oppression is an essential component of womanism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

Taking the elements of womanism into account, it becomes evident that it is a framework that takes into consideration the “interdependence of experience, consciousness, and action” (Banks-Wallace, 2000). This viewpoint suggests that the connection of the three strengthens the possibility that a shift in thought and action can be the vehicle for a changed consciousness (Banks-Wallace, 2000). However, the goal of this framework is not to raise levels of consciousness, but to allow the African-American woman to rearticulate a level of awareness that is already present (Collins, 2000).

### **Multiple Identities, Circular Consciousness, and Intersectionality**

Womanism acknowledges that because many African-American women have experienced the meeting of racism, sexism, and classism, they often have a unique vantage point from which they view the world (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Therefore, womanism recognizes that these cultural oppressions have happened simultaneously and thereby offer a holistic perspective for the experience of women of color (Chikwendu, 2013; Wilkins, 2012; Williams, 2005).

This perspective is grounded in what is called multiple-identities (Williams, 2005), or circular consciousness (Wilkins, 2012). These expressions derive from the term *double consciousness*, which refers to an individual having a multicultural brain (Comas-Diaz, 2008). Consequently, this is an area in the lives of women of color where they must contend with the fact that they are neither one nor the other of anything, but a myriad of

narratives in one person (Chikwendu, 2013; Crenshaw, 1993; Williams, 2005). As a result, her identity has its foundation in a multicultural brain that has the capacity to hold concurrently multiple beliefs, change from one viewpoint to another, incorporate several cultural viewpoints, and create a new reality out of conflicting positions (Chikwendu, 2013; Collins 2000; Comas-Diaz, 2008; Wilkins, 2012).

The place where these identities or positions meet is the axes often referred to as *intersectionality* (Chikwendu, 2013; Collins 2000; Comas-Diaz, 2008; Crenshaw, 1993; Wilkins, 2012; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Therefore, a fundamental aspect of this paradigm is that the individual positions of identity cannot be understood as disconnected categories of investigation, but rather as constituted reciprocally (Wilkins, 2012). Consequently, these positions never completely disappear and are ever-evolving, circulating positions that result in incessant redefinition and understanding (Chikwendu, 2013; Collins, 2000; Wilkins, 2012; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010).

Historically, researchers have shown the disempowering nature of intersectionality by the political power structure's strategy of controlling images and assumptions (Chikwendu, 2103; Crenshaw, 1993; Wilkins, 2012). However, there are those who argue that the ability to change positions and to redefine oneself in order to meet the needs of daily survival is, in fact, empowering (Chikwendu, 2013; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1993; Wilkins, 2012). Further, the African-American woman carries with her the understanding that identities can be hierarchised despite the fact that they happen simultaneously, depending on the issues she faces (Chikwendu, 2013). For this reason, it is this ability to create, connect, and reinvent oneself that gives the African-American women power to establish an identity that meets the needs of her lived experiences (Chikwendu, 2013; Wilkins, 2012).

The effort to meet her needs and the needs of other African-American women transitions from a personal fight to a political battle. It is a battle because society attempts to separate those oppressive positions that collectively impact her life and in many cases force her to do the same (Chikwendu, 2013; Crenshaw, 1993; Wilkins, 2012). When she ignores one oppressive position, another is activated (Wilkins, 2012). Likewise, when these positions are viewed separately, important aspects of the African-American woman's experiences are disregarded because her experience is a triplicate of oppression (Williams, 2005; Williams & Wiggins, 2010). A focus on one position does not tell her entire story (Chikwendu, 2013; Crenshaw, 1993; Wilkins, 2012; Williams, 2005; Williams & Wiggins, 2010).

### **The Womanist: Othermothering, Motherline, and Motherwit**

Black women's experiences as blood-mothers, othermothers, and community othermothers reveal that the mythological standard of a heterosexual married couple, nuclear family with a nonworking spouse, and a husband as the primary wage earner is far from being natural, universal, and preferred. Instead, that definition is deeply embedded in specific race and class structure (Collins, 1996). Therefore, for womanists, mothering surpasses the traditional Euro-American definition (Case, 1997). Rather, mothering relates to the African proverb that asserts, "It takes a village to raise a child" (Healey & Salaam, 1998). In the African-American community, particularly in the education community, women of color have a tendency to relate to all children as if they were their own (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Roseboro & Ross, 2009; Sernak, 2004). This concept is known as *othermothering*. Othermothering is defined as women who help blood-mothers by sharing motherly tasks (Case, 1997; Collins, 2000; Guiffrida, 2005; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The

concept has its beginnings in the history of slavery as an act of a survival method in response to the incessant need to share the responsibility of child nurturance (Case, 1997; James, 1993; King & Ferguson, 2011; Sernak, 2004; Ward, 1995). Mothering others' children within slave communities was essential, not only because of shared responsibility, but also because the sale or death of parents left many children orphaned (Collins, 2005; Guiffrida, 2005; Sernak, 2004; Ward, 1995). Later, even though slavery came to an end, othermothering became a way for African-American women to prepare Black children for the harsh realities of racism (Roseboro & Ross, 2009).

The concept of othermothering coincides with African-American female educators' pedagogy and womanist caring; it is the belief that educators teach their students as if they were instructing their own children (Amott & Matthaei, 1996). Therefore, this embracing of the maternal, one of the distinctions of womanist caring, requires teachers to accomplish the aforementioned and to meet each child's individual needs by whatever means necessary (Cozart & Gordon, 2006; Phillips, 2006). Another element of othermothering and womanist caring is political awareness and understanding (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Cozart & Gordon, 2006). Political awareness and understanding means realizing that oppression is structural and not an individual act of spite and planning (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Cozart & Gordon, 2006). It is systemic and likely something the students will experience. Thus, othermothering and womanist caring is when women of color use their experiences with oppression to attend to the development of younger generations (Case, 1997; Dingus, 2008; Guiffrida, 2005). In many ways, African-American womanist pedagogy was inherited, consciously and unconsciously, as African-American women watched their mothers, grandmothers, and great grandmothers educate others in unfathomable circumstances (Collins, 2000;

Guiffrida, 2005; King & Ferguson, 2011; Roseboro & Ross, 2009).

**Motherline.** The education passed down from one generation to the next is accomplished through what Lowinsky (1992) termed as the *motherline*. *Motherline* is the name given to the intergeneration lineage of women who bring with them the history and biology of a family through the grandmother, daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter (Trotman, 2011). The motherline plays an important role in educating Black students and women when it comes to addressing the systematic politics of suppression, by teaching self-love, societal analysis, opposition to oppression, and belief in the ability of the self to transform the world (Case, 1997; Guiffrida, 2005; King & Ferguson, 2011).

**Motherwit.** The information passed on through the motherline by way of mothers and othermothers is called *motherwit* (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Case, 1997; King & Ferguson, 2011). In the African-American community, motherwit is a collection of instructions passed on through generations of mothers that provides information necessary to raise children to thrive in an environment of subjugation and oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Case, 1997; King & Ferguson, 2011). In this way, African-American mothers of the late 19th and 20th centuries understood with immense clarity the objectification of Black womankind, and they deliberately passed on to their daughters the strategic nourishment needed to outwit oppressive forces (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; King & Ferguson, 2011). Accordingly, this information is, and in most cases was and remains, an oral tradition passed down through storytelling (Case, 1997; King & Ferguson, 2011). Black women intellectuals from the 1800s to the present used motherwit in a different form to give voice to some of the most controversial issues of their time by using the power of writing, including personal storytelling, to take on and

engage in psychosocial confrontation, to effect change, and to create realms of radical transformative learning (King & Ferguson, 2011; Roseboro & Ross, 2009).

However, motherwit is not something available solely for the intellectual. It is an everyday woman's way of expression (Phillips, 2006; King & Ferguson, 2011). Many African-American women use stories in their daily lives and, particularly, as a way of doing emotional work (Aptheker, 1989; Case, 1997). In addition to narrating, these stories have been stitched into quilts, planted in gardens, painted, sculpted, or written in letters and journals (Aptheker, 1989). As a result, these stories bring to mind unique meanings and activist-type arrangements that have been formed out of the pieces of daily life (Aptheker, 1989). This art provides a means for African-American women to use the motherwit within them to address their needs and the needs of their community (Aptheker, 1989; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; King & Ferguson, 2011).

In the educational system, the amalgamation of the motherline, othermothering, and motherwit is seen clearly. Educators use the motherwit passed down to them through the motherline to help them in their role as othermothers. Based on the educator's lives and experiences outside the classroom, the maternal form of engagement with students serves as a relational compass for teaching (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Educators find that their motherly qualities and mother-child associations allow them to connect with their students and are central to their fight against racial and patriarchal control (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

In regard to student perception of educators, students consider teachers effective when they go above and beyond when assisting students in formal education (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Case, 1997; Guiffrida, 2005). In doing so, these educators also create foundational relationships with their students' families and put into place solid and high

expectations in order to empower them (Case, 1997; Guiffrida, 2005). They develop what Lomotey (1990) described as a holistic approach. This approach stresses teaching or tending to the entire child because these educators believe that each student's personal growth and development is integral to the educational process (Case, 1997; Guiffrida, 2005; Patterson, Mickelson, Hester, & Wyrick, 2011). Like othermothering, this approach involves creating and maintaining close relationships with students' families, believing in them while pushing them to succeed, and providing culturally rich pedagogy within the curricula (Case, 1997; Guiffrida, 2005; Patterson et al., 2011).

### **Educating to Transgress**

The womanist concepts of empowerment, independence, interdependence, struggle, othermothering, and activism have found their way naturally into the field of academics. However, in a field where African-American representation is relatively low, African-American female educators find themselves fighting for a voice and for those who are underserved (Berry, 2005; Bloom & Erlandson, 2004; Karpinski, 2006; Loder, 2005a). Yet, for many of these women, being an educator is not simply a job; it is a vocation, a calling, and a responsibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2004; Loder, 2005a). Her calling is to use education as a movement that does away with boundaries and makes education the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994).

For years, African-American female educators have felt that their role in education was more than an occupation (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Collins, 1992, Loder, 2005a; Valente, 1996). This was because, historically, African-American women were forced to perform the lowest jobs in society, so when the opportunity came to attain higher education, employment opportunities had greater significance (Amott & Matthaei, 1996; Comas-Diaz, 2008; Loder, 2005a). Consequently, with these opportunities came

responsibility and positions in leadership. As a result, the increase in African-American leadership occurred during the Jim Crow era when schools were segregated and leaders were needed to ensure the walls of inequality were not widening (Loder, 2005b; Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Leadership opportunities also increased with the emergence of integration as a way to help ensure a smooth transition (Loder, 2005b; Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Women such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Lucy Laney, and Nancy Burroughs not only led schools, but built institutions that addressed the specific needs of African-American families and children (Loder, 2005b; Murtadha & Watts, 2005).

Although McLeod Bethune, Laney, and Burroughs did not claim to be feminist nor womanist, they became considered as foremothers. Their lives, actions, and words served as the foundation for womanist thought (Burrow, 1998; Giles, 2006; Phillips, 2006). These women, along with others, such as Dr. Anna Julian Cooper and Mary Church Terrell, challenged the late 19th century and early 20th century societal norms through the fight for racial uplift (Giles, 2006).

Just as the foremothers, contemporary African-American women, particularly in the field of education, felt compelled to work for the disenfranchised (Case, 1997; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Maparyan, 2011). By modeling themselves after other influential African-American women, these educators embraced a form of compassion that was simultaneously communal and political (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Patterson et al., 2011). Additionally, participating in this form of care verified that few places beyond the schoolhouse existed in society where underserved students could ascend beyond passivity to a place of critical and participatory involvement with the world around them (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). Thus, like their foremothers, contemporary African-

American female educators reflect incessantly on the suffering people endure, and many prefer to work with the oppressed. They challenge social injustice and extend their united support to oppressed individuals all over the world (Comas-Diaz, 2008; DeLaney & Rogers, 2004; Williams, 2005). Collins (1996) stated that, “By making the community stronger, African-American women become empowered, and that same community can serve as a source of support when black women encounter race, gender, and class oppression” (p. 17).

All in all, the survival and the future of the urban community could and can still be found in the schoolhouse (hooks, 1994). As a result, the African-American female educator finds herself not only with the task of providing a solid academic experience, but she feels compelled to prepare her students for life beyond the safety of the classroom (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Case, 1997; King & Ferguson, 2011; Patterson et al., 2011). Moreover, she produces pedagogy that blends teaching what is mandatory with nurturing an understanding and pride in African-American culture and history (King & Ferguson, 2011; Patterson et al., 2011). She does this because her role is not just educator, but political activist as well (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; DeLaney & Rogers, 2004; hooks, 1994; Patterson et al., 2011). Furthermore, she also recognizes that her students will encounter racism, social injustices, and be targets of unfavorable stereotyping. Therefore, she is committed to providing racial uplifting for the betterment of those disenfranchised (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Patterson et al., 2011).

### **Womanism and Activism**

Since the beginning of the African and African-American woman’s experience on the soil of America, activism has played a significant role in securing the rights of all underserved people (Bloom & Erlandson, 2004; DeLaney & Rogers, 2004; hooks, 1994;

Loder, 2005b; Oesterreich, 2007; Sernak, 2004). Activism has been the catalyst to obtaining many of the liberties garnered today, especially in the field of education. Unfortunately, for many years, much of the documented history of education in America did not include information on African-American women educational activism (Bloom & Erlandson, 2007; Brunner & Peyton-Claire, 2000; Henry, 2001). Revolutionary Black women's stories have often been allocated to a historical footnote or absent altogether (Neville & Hamer, 2006). However, with the growth of Black feminism and womanism, the studies have increased (DeLaney & Rogers, 2004) and earlier stories of African-American female activism have been uncovered.

While activism is often viewed through a lens focused on the confrontations of institutional power (Collins, 2000; Oesterreich, 2007), for African-American women, the fight for equality was not achieved through the traditional definitions of activism, but by taking advantage of existing opportunities to fight personal and/or group oppressions (Collins, 2000). Her battle occurred during her everyday experiences (Collins, 2000; Oesterreich, 2007; Sernak, 2004).

It was during these times that she found a way to challenge domination by crafting spheres of influence that resisted oppressive structures by undermining them instead of directly confronting them (Collins, 2000). Examples of such behavior include using the guise of an insurance salesman to solicit voter registration; using *siddon look* tactics, a Nigerian term that means to sit and wait patiently and silently; by hosting individual silent sit-ins at restaurants that refused to service African-Americans; or deciding not to reveal that one's children were in college in order to seem less intimidating (Collins, 2000; Maparyan, 2011; Oesterreich, 2007).

This approach to activism forced an African-American woman to do away with

societal expectations and create a new reality for herself (Bloom & Erlandson, 2004; Collins, 2000; Oesterreich, 2007). By doing so, she enacted a form of resistance that enabled her to have control over her self-definitions and self-valuations and encourage those in her community to do the same (Collins, 2000). Consequently, new possibilities emerged for the community despite the façade or mask of superficially adhering to prevailing rules and expectations (Collins, 2000; Ramsey, 2012).

Fighting personal and/or group oppressions does not suggest that African-American women did not participate in traditional forms of activism; however, it widens the view of the history of female activism by presenting information that has been overlooked (Collins, 2000). Many of these women used the home, their work, the church, and the schoolhouse to bring about change (Collins, 2000; Ramsey, 2012). Within the confines of these experiences, these women organized and created Black female spheres of influence where information was passed that provided rules, methodology, and tools to survive, resist, and undermine oppressive forces (Collins, 2000; King & Ferguson, 2011; Ramsey, 2012). This information, or motherwit, was vital because in it held one of the keys to racial uplifting. It was the way in which African-American females could actively encourage group progression while involuntarily maintaining the roles placed upon them (Collins, 2000).

One place where the Black woman found her power of influence to be substantial was within the schoolhouse (Collins, 2000; Ramsey, 2012; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Ever since the emergence of what Gates (1988) referenced as the trope of The Talking Book—the emergence and importance of literacy as a means to freedom within African-American slave culture—education has been synonymous with freedom. This trope, or reoccurring motif, signified within many early slave narratives, speaks of how

literacy was the tool to escape the confines of slavery (Gates, 1988). Therefore, those educators charged with providing this form of instruction were revered within the African-American community (Collins, 2000; Ramsey, 2012). As a result, many of these female educators used this sphere of influence as a way to ensure group survival while fighting institutional oppression (Ramsey, 2012; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). They taught and led in less than favorable conditions, ensured student safety during segregation and integration, and encouraged and guided their students to use education as a cornerstone of community uplift (Collins, 2000; Ramsey, 2012; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010).

Similarly, as the teacher's role as activist within the school served as one Black female sphere of influence, the role of the parent, particularly the mother, was just as vital. African-American mothers' education served as a means to freedom (Collins, 2000). By ensuring that her children understood the importance of education and by making certain they received one, she resisted the confines of slavery and passed that same ideology on to her children (Collins, 2000).

Additionally, the Black woman's influence permeated many other areas of community life. There was a clear intersection between the school and the church (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). For the African-American community, the church was and still remains a place of spiritual, political, educational, social, and cultural activity (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Therefore, it was and still is a place of hope for the community. Since its beginnings, it has served as a place where women could find positions of influence (Collins, 2000; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). The church community also understood the centrality of the African-American female's position within its realms (Collins, 2000). It was here that she discovered opportunities for

leadership that were not available to her elsewhere (Collins, 2000; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Not only did these opportunities make themselves available, but this sphere of influence brought about movement centered on self-reliance (Collins, 2000; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010).

The crusade for self-reliance not only found its grounding in the church, but spread to what is known as the Black Club Movement. While the church was open to all African-American women, regardless of their economic or educational backgrounds, the Black Club Movement's membership consisted of upper-middle-class African-American women only (Collins, 2000; Edwards, 2000). As a result of the financial, educational, and cultural privileges these women had, they believed they were in the best position to "uplift" the race (Collins, 2000; Edwards, 2000). The National Association for Colored Women (NACW) served as the umbrella under which these organizations existed (Collins, 2000; Edwards, 2000). The members worked to challenge the demeaning stereotypes and images placed upon them, worked for antilynching laws, and moved to develop strategies that fought racial discrimination in voting, education, public accommodations, armed services, and housing (Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 1999). As a result of these networks of kinship, the members erected social and political associations with a focus on community self-sufficiency (Collins, 2000; Roseboro & Ross, 2009).

Despite the limited opportunities available to her within other activist organizations, the African-American female either found her place within them or established her own (Collins, 2000; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). She understood that when fighting oppression on a multitude of levels, she had to privilege racial and gender identities selectively (Collins, 2000; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). For example, she fought

alongside those within the Civil Rights Movement, Planned Parenthood, the Girl Scouts, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Children's Defense Fund, to name a few (Collins, 2000).

The progression of African-American female activism has evolved with the times. Remnants of the past remain, although transformation has occurred in order to meet the needs of a new generation. The African-American female activist views her life as an extension of her quest to fight the oppression of marginalized individuals (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Phillips, 2006; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). In this way, they are like the canaries in the study conducted by Guinier and Torres (2002). Just as the canaries informed miners that trouble lay ahead, the activists of the past and present cajole others to do and be something different, if what worked in the past is not working in the present. African-American female activists "alert us to both danger and promise" (Guinier & Torres, 2002, p. 12).

Initially, this desire to serve, transgress, and educate may seem to result from experiences in racial solidarity and histories of experiencing and witnessing injustice toward minorities. However, as with many African-American female activists, and as fundamental within the womanist tradition, her desire for equality tends to extend past her own personal boundaries and to all who are marginalized. Therefore, what may have begun as a personal concern led her to the plights of different racial and ethnic communities (Collins, 2000). Within the womanist tradition, it is vital that one recognizes her cultural roots and experiences herself as a cultural or ethnic being, yet also be able to see herself and her people as part of a larger global body defined by common humanness (Phillips, 2006; Maparyan, 2011). From this viewpoint within the womanist framework, people start the practice of struggling for commonwealth at various levels of

community—from one's own culture, to all humankind, to all living things, to Earth, to the universe, and to all realms of creation (Phillips, 2006).

### **Womanism and the Ethic of Care**

When a teacher stays after school in order to facilitate a program for underachieving students, without financial supplement or funding to enhance her efforts, she is demonstrating what Noddings (2003) called an ethic of care. The ethic of care in education is when the educator, regardless of prior personal experience, feels a genuine, moral obligation to attend to those under her tutelage (Noddings, 2003). Accordingly, this definition exemplifies the way many African-American women in education view their vocation. When they interact with their students, there is a sense of obligation (Bloom & Erlandson 2003; Loder, 2005b; Loder-Jackson, 2011).

Caring, which is considered a virtue, an attribute, or a disposition, is also a reciprocal relationship that involves the one caring and the cared-for (Noddings, 2003). However, although adopted by many, Noddings's care ethic is also criticized by some (Roseboro & Ross, 2009). For example, a study on care sickness is framed in a reconceptualizing of the ethic of care as well as Freire's (1921) liberatory education. Roseboro and Ross (2009) viewed the ethic of care as an obligation expected of, not determined by, the teacher. The rationale for reconceptualizing the ethic of care is the belief that it does not take into account the unique lived experiences of African-American women (Roseboro & Ross, 2009). One area where this is evident is the issue of trust. Trust, essential in the ethic of care, is not a part of the African-American female experience with education (Roseboro & Ross, 2009). For example, the lack of trust African-Americans have in the educational system, among other social systems that engage in the oppression of African-Americans, actually leads to a legend of resistance

(Roseboro & Ross, 2009). For the African-American educator, teaching to transgress has become the norm and, therefore, many live in this permanent state of resistance.

Consequently, this state of resistance exemplifies how these educators care and how they teach their students to care (hooks, 1994). This legend of resistance makes the educational structure a platform on which to establish different curriculum that promotes community uplift (Roseboro & Ross, 2009).

Despite the issue of trust, the research does suggest that elements within the traditional ethic of care and libratory education are involved in the African-American female educator's desire to uplift her community. However, her ethic of care and libration is paralleled to that of womanist caring. Therefore, African-American female educators who adopt this particular type of caring teach with an embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk (Roseboro & Ross, 2009). In order to teach using the aforementioned, these women operate with differing definitions of the relationships between work and care, freedom and choice, and authority and power (Roseboro & Ross, 2009). Additionally, they prepare their students for the unfortunate realities of racism using brutal honesty and direct and strict instruction (Bloom & Erlandson, 2004; Roseboro & Ross, 2009; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). They do away with an ethic of care that includes the belief that freedom and choice, for Black Americans, is unsteadily connected to the penchant of White Americans (Loder, 2005b; Loder-Jackson, 2011; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). Moreover, these women also used their authority and power to strategically counter structures of oppression (Bloom & Erlandson, 2004; Roseboro & Ross, 2009; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010).

In predominately African-American schools, the notion of the leader as caregiver has always existed. The leader is expected to focus on the child's entire wellbeing in

several areas: social, emotional, and financial (Mawhinney, Rinke, & Park, 2012).

Therefore, this unique notion of care encompasses a major aspect of the womanist ethic of care—embrace of the maternal—but is also grounded in political clarity and the ethic of risk (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Patterson et al., 2011). These elements of womanist caring manifest through activism, relationship building, and communication (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Camangian, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Miller, 2011; Noddings, 2003; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). Exemplary African-American female educators utilize the familiar and familial mother-child relationship as a guide for their connections with students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

Historically, the theme of political clarity has remained constant in studies and analyses of Black students and teachers who see racism and other areas of injustice as both a societal and educational issue. Consequently, they view their role as an educator and the power it entails as a way to contest the common stereotypes placed on children (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). In challenging societal oppressions, the African-American female educator assumes an ethic-of-risk when she fights. Knowing that there is no guarantee of success, she does so because she sees her work as a humble yet important part to a widespread, shared, and lasting project of social change (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

**Care and activism.** Within the history of African-American education, there has always been the idea of education as a means to transgress (hooks, 1994). For Black women, othermothering and teaching to remove boundaries demand an ethic of care that is cynical and practical, personified and performed, private and public (Patterson et al., 2011; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Ramsey, 2012; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). As a result, the ethic of care transcends a mere desire to do something; African-American female

educators learned from other female activists the importance of caring as a central role in social activism, and began to personify caring as a means to advocate for children (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Ramsey, 2012). The ethic of care means that, regardless of how the teacher is feeling about a student, what supersedes is the obligation to do something in order to effect change (Noddings, 2003). Therefore, for African-American female educators, the idea of moving beyond self for the betterment of all children in her community represents a critical aspect of womanist caring (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Patterson et al., 2011).

**Relationships.** In addition to selflessness, African-American female teachers who exhibit womanist caring and the ethic of care ensure that they create relationships with their students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Noddings, 2003). These teachers work to ensure that each student is aware of his or her individual importance, and they do away with idiosyncratic and individualistic connections (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Patterson et al., 2011). In many urban schools, establishing relationships serves as a precursor to learning (Milner, 2011). There is a direct connection between building relationships and accomplishing the end result of learning (Bergman, 2004). For African-American educators, the relationship building process does not stop with the students; creating connections with parents as well is an integral part of the care ethic within their pedagogy and leadership styles (Patterson et al., 2011).

**Dialogue.** One way young people are educated is through relationships developed through dialogue. Womanist concerns with dialogue are rooted in both the African oral traditions and African-American culture of resistance and distrust (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Consequently, dialogue enables individuals to engage in critically insightful, controversial conversations (Sheared, 1994). Womanist caring requires educators to not

only engage students in this type of dialogue, but to encourage them to see its importance. Within this ethic of caring, dialogue allows for personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy to occur (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Personal expression is a major aspect of the womanist and African-American tradition. It is a point of view that says each individual is a unique manifestation of the divine (Banks-Wallace, 2002). The appropriateness of emotions is also an essential aspect of womanist caring in relation to dialogue. The emotions are considered to be an indicator of the belief one has in the validity of what he or she has to say (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Through dialogue, there is an ability to be empathetic. It is a feeling of concern or a bond between the person making the claim and the evaluator. It is the idea that one's wellbeing is tied to another's (Banks-Wallace, 2002).

When the African-American teacher poses a question to her class and the students answer, the educator is not just receiving the response, but she is receiving the person in a sort of polyrhythmic experience (Noddings, 2003; Sheared, 1994). Therefore, for African-American educators, an ethic of caring creates an atmosphere in which individuals come to an interconnected state of being through call and response, a technique of communication originating in Africa and brought over to the Americas by slaves. This form of communication has been ritualized in the Black church; yet it can be witnessed in the academic classrooms and in comedy, rap, and rhythm and blues (Hamlet, 2011). Call and response is a form of communication grounded on the assumption that consistent and timely exchange between speaker and listener is essential in order for real communication to take place (Hamlet, 2011). The questions and the answers, or calls and responses, determine the level of trust and caring that is necessary if learning is to occur (Sheared, 1994).

Teachers who are seeking to bring about transformation in the curriculum so that it is not an expression of bias or an imitation of the systems of dominance are usually those who are willing to take the risks that bring about engaged pedagogy within their classes (hooks, 1994). Educators who expect students to reveal confessional stories but are unwilling to share as well are exercising power or creating the oppressive power differential in a manner that could be perceived as threatening (hooks, 1994). Through shared communication, one goes from the subordinating role of listener to the powerful role of speaker, thereby reflecting, analyzing, and then finally constructing knowledge for oneself (Sheared, 1994). Shared communication is also a way for students to view alternative ways of seeing the world and understanding how and why they operate as they do, thereby creating a sense of interconnectedness with others (Sheared, 1994). For these reasons, dialogue within the classroom is a necessary and mutual experience (hooks, 1994).

### **National School Leadership Standards**

Currently, there is a large effort focused on school reform. One area that is garnering attention is school leadership. In 1996, members of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) conceived and developed national school leadership standards and then revised the standards in 2008 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, 2008). Initially, the first six ISLLC standards were developed to establish uniform guidelines for policy development at the state and district levels (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). The initial standards, which were also intended for use in describing effective school leadership, were designed for assisting in the development of training programs that support the professional growth of future school leaders and for guiding existing school leaders in the continuous cycle of school

improvement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). After publishing the initial standards, members of the ISLLC developed seven guiding principles to serve as a basis for revising the standards that are currently used in educational leadership programs across the country (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; Hilliard & Jackson, 2011). The literature reflected that the ISLLC standards are effective for marginalizing diversity in support of the improved academic achievement of ethnic and racial minority students (Corrigan, 2012; Smith & Addison, 2013; Spanneut, Tobin, & Ayers, 2012).

The guiding principles were identified to assist in revising the preliminary educational leadership standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). As Hilliard and Jackson (2011) stressed, the wide-ranging responsibilities of school principals create a more challenging task over time. This concept supports the continual revision of the leadership standards in an attempt to prepare both current and future leaders with the necessary qualities and skills. Further, the principles identified the expectations that the revised standards would (a) “reflect the centrality of student learning”; (b) “acknowledge the changing role of the school leader”; (c) “recognize the collaborative nature of school leadership”; (d) “improve the quality of the profession”; (e) “inform performance-based systems of assessment”; (f) “demonstrate integration and coherence”; and (g) “advance access, opportunity, and empowerment for all members of the school community” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 7). A brief description of the standards and related functions, described in the following text, reflects the purpose of each of the guiding principles. Additionally, the related functions that apply to this study are also identified.

The ISLLC Standard 1 is: “An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of

a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 14). The functions related to this study involve leadership efforts to (a) “collaboratively develop and implement a shared vision and mission”; (b) collect and use data to identify goals, assess organizational effectiveness, and promote organizational learning”; (c) “create and implement plans to achieve goals”; (d) “promote continuous and sustainable improvement”; and (e) “monitor and evaluate progress and revise plans” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 14). Thus, each of these functions are critical when considering the need to establish a schoolwide vision of learning in support of ethnic and racial minorities in improving academic achievement.

The ISLLC Standard 2 is: “An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 14). The first five related functions involve leadership efforts to (a) “nurture and sustain a culture of collaboration, trust, learning, and high expectations”; (b) create a comprehensive, rigorous, and coherent curricular program”; (c) “create a personalized and motivating learning environment for students”; (d) “supervise instruction”; and (e) “develop assessment and accountability systems to monitor student progress” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 14).

However, the remaining four related functions promote the need to (a) “develop the instructional and leadership capacity of staff,” (b) “maximize time spent on quality instruction,” (c) “promote the use of the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching and learning,” and (d) “monitor and evaluate the impact of the instructional program” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 14). Each of these functions represents a central principle in promoting a school culture that is

supportive of student success.

The ISLLC Standard 3 is: “An education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 14). The five related functions involve leadership efforts to (a) “monitor and evaluate the management and operational systems”; (b) obtain, allocate, align, and efficiently utilize human, fiscal, and technological resources”; (c) “Promote and protect the welfare and safety of students and staff”; (d) “develop the capacity for distributed leadership”; and (e) “ensure teacher and organizational time is focused to support quality instruction and student learning” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 14). Although each of these functions is vital within the school community, the two most essential in this study are the promotion and protection of students and staff and the support of quality instruction and student learning.

The ISLLC Standard 4 is: “An education leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 15). The four functions related to this study promote the need to (a) “collect and analyze data and information pertinent to the educational environment”; (b) “promote understanding, appreciation, and use of the community’s diverse cultural, social, and intellectual resources”; (c) “build and sustain positive relationships with families and caregivers”; and (d) “build and sustain productive relationships with community partners” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 15). Although all of these functions are supportive of the school community, the development of positive relationships with families and caregivers is significant to

improve the academic achievement of all students, but especially to those of ethnic and racial minorities.

The ISLLC Standard 5 is: “An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 15). The five related functions involve leadership efforts to (a) “ensure a system of accountability for every student’s academic and social success”; (b) model principles of self-awareness, reflective practice, transparency, and ethical behavior”; (c) “safeguard the values of democracy, equity, and diversity”; (d) “consider and evaluate the potential moral and legal consequences of decision-making”; and (e) promote social justice and ensure that individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 15). All five of these functions represent central tenets in promoting a school culture that is supportive of student success.

The ISLLC Standard 6 is: “An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 15). The three related functions promote the need to (a) “advocate for children, families, and caregivers”; (b) “act to influence local, district, state, and national decisions affecting student learning”; and (c) “assess, analyze, and anticipate emerging trends and initiatives in order to adapt leadership strategies” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 15). Each of these functions is central in promoting a school culture that is supportive of student success.

### **Complementary Leadership Skills**

Following the publication of the initial ISLLC standards, Reeves (2006, 2009)

identified effective skills of educational leaders. Reeves purported that the skills are collectively reflective of the principles, standards, and functions contained in the ISLLC standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, 2008). As reflected in the following description, all seven skills can be applied to this study. The first complementary leadership skill involves the visionary leadership through which the leader identifies the school vision. With this skill, an effective leader (a) demonstrates passion for the vision; (b) listens to stakeholders sharing their thoughts about the vision; (c) models commitment to the vision; (d) practices empathy; (e) provides attention, support, and feedback; and (f) respects confidences of stakeholders (Reeves, 2006, 2009).

The second complementary leadership skill involves the development of relationships with stakeholders through which leaders exhibit passion for the school mission and model commitment to stakeholders. This skill involves the school leader consistently engaging in purposeful collaboration intended to promote systemic, sustained improvement (Reeves, 2006, 2009).

The third complementary skill is systems leadership. Through the development of this skill, the leader understands the complexity of interpersonal interactions with individuals throughout the school community. When the skill is fully developed, the school leader understands the related leadership dynamics and can effectively explain them to staff and faculty members as well as other stakeholders within the school community (Reeves, 2006, 2009).

The fourth complementary leadership skill involves ongoing practices of self-reflection. By practicing related behaviors, the school leader can effectively (a) reflect on learning experiences, (b) recognize potential conflicts between values and practices, and (c) identify emerging trends within the school community (Reeves, 2006, 2009).

The fifth complementary leadership skill involves regular engagement in collaboration. Through collaboration, the school leader will recognize (a) the importance of treating staff members as if they are volunteers; (b) that action plans will not be skillfully implemented without effective collaboration; and (c) that sustained, systemic improvement will not occur without collaboration (Reeves, 2006, 2009).

The sixth complementary skill involves the abilities to analyze problems, understand related interactions and complex variables, and achieve effective approaches for solving problems (Reeves, 2006, 2009). The seventh complementary skill involves the development of communication skills in order that the school leader can clearly communicate throughout the organization. Reeves (2009) emphasized the importance of recognizing the wide range of audiences within a school community and the need for the school leader to develop both verbal and written skills to ensure communication occurs in a timely manner.

### **Educational Leadership**

A review of the literature reflects the concept that the fundamental purpose of school leadership is to improve student achievement (Blankstein, 2010; Jacobson, 2010; Sammons et al., 2010). Because students must score proficiently on criterion-based tests to demonstrate the achievement of state standards, the quality of leadership is frequently measured through test scores (Reeves, 2006, 2009; Sanzo et al., 2010; Singh, 2011). Over time, researchers have highlighted different aspects of effective leadership that include (a) school improvement (Fullan, 2002), (b) the creation of a positive school culture (Peterson & Deal, 1999), and (c) the “leading [of] a healthy learning community” (Dickerson, 2012, p. 55). By putting these aspects into practice, leaders are able to promote professional reflection, a safe learning community, dialogue among staff and

faculty members, a collaborative school culture, and the freedom to take risks in efforts to achieve the school vision (Dickerson, 2012).

Jacobson (2010), who also addressed the topic of effective school leadership, credited teachers for being the single, most influential factor on student motivation and achievement. Yet, Jacobson also emphasized that leadership effectiveness directly determines teacher motivation and the quality of classroom instruction. Jacobson, as well as Beachum, McCray, and Huang (2010), further reported that quality leadership is critical in schools with high enrollments of ethnic and racial minorities and students of low socioeconomic status.

School success is viewed as the collective effort of many stakeholders, yet the literature reflected that school success ultimately depends on three interactive factors: (a) effective leadership, (b) the school vision, and (c) continuous learning (Kurland, Peretz, & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2010; Milanowski, 2011). Along this line of thought, Kurland et al. (2010) conducted an applied research study involving a sample of approximately 1,500 elementary teachers employed in 104 schools. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship among the factors of school leadership, vision, and continuous learning (Kurland et al., 2010). To be included in the sample, teachers were required to be assigned at schools wherein the principal had served for a minimum of 3 years (Kurland et al., 2010).

Teachers participating in the study were asked to evaluate their principals and schools using a survey designed to elicit perceptions involving principal leadership, the school vision, and organizational learning (Kurland et al., 2010). Findings reflected that principal leadership predicted both the school vision and the depth of organizational learning (Kurland et al., 2010). Kurland et al. (2010) found additionally that the school

vision was “the impetus for school transformation processes and a crucial element of effective leadership of learning organizations” (p. 19). By emphasizing the school vision, effective leaders were able to set the direction of the schools and then work to develop a shared understanding among staff and faculty involving the goals and activities intended to achieve the vision (Kurland et al., 2010). Kurland et al. (2010) further emphasized the importance of the school vision by suggesting that, through the vision, the principal provided “a strong sense of purpose that motivates school staff” (p. 19). Results supported the concept that the school vision was the impetus for school transformation and further underscored the importance of providing an engaging and effective learning experience for all children.

Sammons et al. (2010) also conducted a study to explore the effects of school leadership on instructional practices and school improvement. The 3-year project used a mixed methodology that included (a) an analysis of national assessment data sets on school performance, (b) an initial quantitative leadership survey, (c) a 1-year follow-up quantitative leadership survey, and (d) a quantitative survey for 740 leaders and more than 2,500 teachers at elementary and secondary schools. The qualitative portion of the data central to the study was derived from 20 case studies of schools where varying levels of academic improvement had been demonstrated (Sammons et al., 2010). Analysis of the data revealed findings similar to those of Kurland et al. (2010) and suggested an obvious link between school leadership, various dimensions of instructional quality and academic performance, school climate, student motivation, and the learning culture of the school (Sammons et al., 2010).

### **Methodology Used in Prior Research**

The research method in any study is relevant to the focus of the research.

Qualitative methodology enables the researcher to collect data that reflects the participants' thoughts, reflections, and experiences in their own words and points of view (Creswell, 2007). In the majority of studies reviewed for this research, a qualitative approach was used in most cases. Many researchers use a phenomenological framework. Phenomenology is a move toward a return to experience in order to gain wide-ranging descriptions that provide the foundation for a reflective structural study that describes the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The method is essential to this study because, "[w]omanist epistemology centers the everyday experiences of African American women as a prerequisite to addressing philosophic problems related to the concepts of knowledge and truth" (Banks-Wallace, 2000, p. 317).

Additional analysis of results that surfaced from prior research proved critical in stressing some of the issues that African-American females, particularly those in education, might experience. A common finding across the studies seemed to suggest that many of the characteristics found in the womanist tradition mirror those that make up contemporary leadership skills. Results from reviewed research also indicated that those same womanist characteristics can help to support African-American women through their life experiences, but they can also be a method used to fight the oppression of marginalized people both inside and beyond the school walls.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

From the beginning of the educational experience of African-Americans within this country, there have been women within the community who understood the liberatory possibilities that result from learning. These women possessed commonalities that helped to promote racial uplift. Additionally, these shared aims reflected the theoretical framework of womanism. As history progressed, other African-American women used

these same characteristics, albeit demonstrated differently, to promote the same cause and have been successful (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Therefore, considering the achievement gap of African-American students compared to other students, it seems advantageous to study womanism and its place in the lived experiences of African-American educational leaders who have achieved success in educating students of color. However, currently the studies are sparse.

Nevertheless, the literature that is available showed how the elements of womanism are reflected in the lives of African-American females and educational leaders of the past and present. Studies addressed how these women turned the seemingly disempowering experiences of intersectionality into a way to combat oppressions by choosing for themselves which aspect of her experience with which to identify at any given moment (Chikwendu, 2013; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1993; Wilkins, 2012). As educators, these women were able to pass this knowledge on to those under their tutelage in order to help them prepare for the realities of a life impacted by oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

The gathering of information that aids in the ability to turn that which is negative into a positive expression of self is an example of the motherwit, or words of wisdom, passed down through the motherline. The motherline is composed of blood-mothers and othermothers who are central figures within the African-American community (Case, 1997; Collins, 2000; Guiffrida, 2005; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Othermothers are those within the community who stand in the gap when blood-mothers cannot (Casey, 1990). The review of literature presented how many African-Americans female educators used motherwit to inform their decision making, particularly in the areas of activism, racial uplift, and survival (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; King & Ferguson, 2011).

Additionally, being othermothers within the community and behind school walls, allowed African-American female educators the ability to develop relationships that concentrated on helping other women and children survive the humiliation of physical, economic, and political enslavement, thereby providing a communal base for social action in education (Collins, 1991).

Another concurrent theme found within the literature was the African-American female educational leader as an activist who teaches to transgress. These leaders understand what students of color will have to face or currently face because of their shared marginalized position in society. As a result, their aim is fight these oppressions by preparing students to be leaders and contributors in the mission of liberating and enhancing the quality of life for African-American people (Siddle-Walker, 1996).

The themes of the maternal, the activist, and the transgressor found in the literature undergird the African-American female's ethic of womanist care. Womanist care is the caring demonstrated by African-American women teachers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Although womanist care has elements of the traditional ethic of care, it is different. It takes into consideration her experiences with intersectionality and the unique vantage point from which she operates when working with her students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). It also encompasses an ethic of risk that encourages her to keep fighting despite the possibility that her efforts could be futile considering the despair her students may face (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

Many African-American women educators who embody the characteristic of womanism have found success (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). This does not appear to be a coincidence because the literature pointed to national leadership standards that reflect many of the elements found in the womanist tradition. These standards address (a)

respect for the individual student, (b) nurturing, (c) relationship building, (d) accountability and responsibility, (e) fairness and ethical treatment, and (f) dialogue (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). Other complementary leadership skills that reflect womanist practices in education are (a) modeling, (b) empathy, (c) the incessant acquisition of knowledge, (d) understanding differences, and (e) collaboration (Reeves, 2006, 2009).

Findings from the literature showed that many of the leadership standards and the womanist traditions work to help those African-American women who serve as educational leaders. According to research, the job of the educational leader is to simply promote student success. In order to do this, a leader must be the one with the vision, provide effective leadership, and be in continuous pursuit of knowledge (Kurland et al., 2010; Milanowski, 2011). He or she must be in constant communication with stakeholders who yield results that are productive. Additionally, an educational leader encourages others by providing wisdom and guidance (Kurland et al., 2010).

### **Research Questions**

One central research question was at the core of this study: How do African-American female educational leaders embrace and exemplify womanism characteristics within their professional lives? In addition, three issues and three procedural questions guided this qualitative research.

Issue questions were:

1. What do the characteristics of womanism mean to African-American female educational leaders?
2. What perceived role do womanist characteristics have in the professional practices and leadership styles of African-American female educational leaders?

3. What elements of womanism influence the African-American female educational leader's efforts in helping to close the achievement gap experienced by many students of color?

Procedural questions included:

1. What themes emerge from these experiences?
2. What are the contexts of and thoughts about the experiences?
3. What is the overall essence of the experience?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this research study was to understand and describe the life experiences of African-American female educational leaders who exemplify womanist characteristics and to identify how the following five factors have influenced their practices in educational leadership: (a) activism, (b) the knowledge and acceptance of multiple consciousnesses, (c) the usage of motherwit, (d) the ethic of care, and (e) the breaking of barriers or transgressive education. The significance of the study stemmed from the minimal amount of existing research that expounds upon the phenomenon of womanism and its role within educational leadership. This information is needed when the otherwise growing body of literature on various other forms of educational leadership is considered. This chapter is dedicated to providing information on the research design and its rationale, participants, the data gathering instruments, procedures, and the limitations that emerged.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

Qualitative analysis proved to be an ideal approach because the principal researcher sought to understand and interpret the experience of the African-American female educational leader through the womanist theoretical lens. The principal researcher wanted a methodology that would allow the participants to share their stories and feel empowered while doing so. Additionally, the principal researcher wanted the women to be collaborators in ensuring that their voices are heard accurately. In this case, quantitative measures and statistical analyses were not appropriate approaches to the problem because the uniqueness of each participant would have been discounted (Creswell, 2012).

Qualitative analysis allowed the principal researcher to question the participants

directly, gather the many factors involved in the discussion of the phenomenon, and identify the complex interactions of these factors (Creswell, 2012). The qualitative framework allowed the principal researcher to utilize those factors in order to put together a comprehensive set of themes that emerged from the one-on-one conversations with participants by focusing on patterns and categorization. Another usefulness of qualitative analysis was the creative flexibility the approach provided the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2012). The qualitative framework is an evolving approach to inquiry (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, the principal researcher was not held to a “tightly prescribed” research plan (Creswell, 2012). As a result, during the interview process, the principal researcher approached with participants with the same set of questions but was able to ask additional questions in order to gain clarity and deeper insight.

In order to gain an in-depth perspective and understanding of the topic central to this research study, the investigation was grounded in rhetorical assumptions. Less formal in nature, rhetorical assumptions allow qualitative researchers to embrace a more personal, literary, and free perspective in regard to gathering research so that participants’ lived experiences can be conveyed in a more delicate narrative form (Creswell, 2012).

### **Phenomenological Approach**

Because the common, shared experiences of several women as those experiences related to a single phenomenon were central to this study, the experiences were best examined using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2012). This approach “intends to return and re-examine these taken for granted experiences and perhaps uncover new and/or forgotten ones” (Laverty, 2003, p. 4). As Husserl (1983) reported,

Phenomenology exposes to its view events of pure consciousness as examples and make them perfectly clear; within limits of this clarity it must analyze and seize upon their essences, trace with insight the essential interconnectedness, formulate

what is beheld in faithful conceptual expressions which allow their sense to be prescribed purely by what is beheld or generally seen, and so forth. (p. 150)

This study attempted to capture and describe, as clearly as possible, womanist characteristics as evidenced in the practices of African-American female educational leaders. As Yorks and Kasl (2002) purported, “A theory of experiences grounded in radical phenomenology provides an attentive perspective that has important educational implications” (p. 176). This statement paralleled the principal researcher’s own belief. In this case, the data collected in this phenomenological study may help those in education provide better service to minority students, particularly in the urban setting.

Robson (2005) viewed phenomenology as “a theoretical perspective advocating for the study of direct experience taken at face value” (p. 550). Robson added, “Phenomenology sees behavior as determined by the phenomenon of experience rather than by external, objective and physically described reality” (p. 550). Rossman and Rallis (1998) asserted similar views:

Phenomenology is a tradition in German philosophy with a focus on the essence of lived experience. Those engaged in phenomenological research focus in-depth on the meaning of a particular aspect of experience, assuming that through dialogue and reflection the quintessential meaning of the experience will be reviewed. Central [to phenomenology] are the notions of intentionality and caring; the researcher inquires about the essence of lived experience. (p. 72)

This research methodology allowed the principal researcher to focus on *what* the participants experienced and *how* they experienced it. Additionally, considering the sole intent of the study was to understand how the participants experienced and understood the phenomenon, this approach was effective because it is one that requires all judgments of the researcher to be suspended and all data to be analyzed unbiasedly. For this reason, each participant was given, as much as possible, a blank slate on which to tell her story.

Prior to each interview, participants were asked to try and abandon all judgments

about the topic in order for their stories to flow with ease and to give them the freedom to be fully cognizant of their lived experiences. As Diesing (1999) promoted, it was the principal researcher's intention that the interviews integral to her study would bring about a shared consciousness involving participants' experiences with womanism and educational leadership. The "goal is not to really reduce the unity of a principal, but rather to disclose the whole wealth of the self-given phenomena in an unbiased way" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 146).

Within the realm of education, "Learning from experience is a foundational concept" (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, p. 178). The concept of experience, however, can be vague. In order to clarify experience for the purposes of this research, the principal researcher contends that experience is "a resource that can be catalogued, objectified, and reflected on" (York & Kasl, 2002, p. 180). If an experience is recorded from the participant's point of view, the data can "cast the individual as a central actor in a drama of personal meaning making," thereby allowing the researcher to describe the view that all participants have in common as it relates to a single phenomenon (Fenwick, 2000, p. 248). Based on Berger's (1963) humanistic perspective, the researcher anticipated achieving the following four goals with the comprehensive data collection: (a) to view the phenomena of womanism and educational leadership from a fresh perspective, (b) to develop interview questions based on research and prompt participants to look deeply into their answers for covert meaning, (c) to allow participants to select the meeting location in order to influence the quality of dialogue, and (d) to recognize that each participant brings something distinctive to the study.

### **Instruments**

In qualitative research, a study comprises multiple components; however, the

interview questions are at the center of the study and serve to connect the components. The questions usually involve an unrestricted, inductive approach for use in discerning meanings and influences and how these factors relate and are involved in the lives, activities, and experiences of the participants (Maxwell, 2005).

Interviews with each participant were used for data collection in this study. “For a phenomenological study, the process of collecting information involves primarily in-depth interviews . . . often multiple interviews are conducted with each of the research participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 131). In the interviews conducted for this study, the principal researcher examined participants’ lived experiences for the purpose of understanding and describing African-American female educational leaders who embody womanist characteristics and to identify how these characteristics have influenced their practices in educational leadership. The interview questions derived from and were grounded in the reviewed literature. After analyzing the literature, the principal researcher looked at the themes that emerged and focused on a narrowing of the centralized research question and subquestions in order to generate the interview questions that would elicit meaningful data.

The interviews were conducted using semistructured and open-ended questions. The semistructured format allowed the researcher to remain organized, balanced, and in control during the interview sessions in order to collect the data needed on all the themes related to the research question and subquestions. By using open-ended questions, the principal researcher was able to give participants the freedom and flexibility to digress and explore different thoughts and new ideas. Probing questions allowed the participants to elaborate on answers, while interpreting questions allowed the researcher to clarify and gain deeper understanding in regards to participants’ individual stories (Strategies for

Qualitative Interview, n.d.).

A personal interview protocol (see Appendix B) was also used as a procedural guide for progressing through the interview process. It served as a list of interview questions, a script for what was to be said at the beginning and end of each interview, prompts to be used in order to collect informed consent, and prompts used to remind the interviewer of the information to be collected (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

The following questions served as the three main interview topics and were designed to address the research questions directly.

1. What do the characteristics of womanism mean to African-American female educational leaders?
2. What perceived role do womanist characteristics have in the professional practices and leadership styles of African-American female educational leaders?
3. What elements of womanism influence the African-American female educational leader's efforts in helping to close the achievement gap experienced by many students of color?

### **Setting**

All of the participants worked in metropolitan areas across the nation. Each of them worked with teachers and schools that served mostly ethnic and racial minority students from areas impacted negatively by the economic downturn across the nation. One of the four participants was employed in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, GA. Atlanta is known for vast opportunities available to minorities, yet it remains extremely segregated. Examples of progress were evident throughout the city: Modern buildings were under construction and old buildings were being restored. New places to live, work, and shop became available almost daily. Yet, this same progress was not being seen

within the local public school district.

It was common knowledge that many of the schools within Atlanta that serviced high minority populations were not afforded the same luxuries as other schools. For example, it was not uncommon to see the schools in the southern section filled with used or an insufficient number of textbooks, antiquated technology, and subpar facilities; on the northern side of town it was just the opposite. There were beautiful campuses, up-to-date technology, and resources. As in many of America's urban classrooms, educators in these schools encountered high levels of diversity in regard to (a) academic achievement, (b) racial and ethnic backgrounds, (c) socioeconomic status, and (d) the percentage of students speaking English as a second language (Nevarez & Wood, 2007). In 2011, although the state unemployment rate was 9%, the local unemployment rate was 11%. None of the schools where the participants served have made adequate yearly progress as required by No Child Left Behind legislation (U.S. Department of Education, Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008).

The second participant worked with a nationwide educational reform organization and a new charter school in St. Petersburg, FL. Although the school was within a highly populated school district because of its charter status, it was not directly affiliated with the local school system. The school's population was 98% African-American. The school serviced students in kindergarten through Grade 8. The students who attended the school were from myriad economic situations. The school was only in its second year of operation and test scores were not available.

The third participant also worked with two nationally known educational reform organizations. However, she had just recently begun working within a highly populated school district in the Southwestern part of the country. Approximately 90,000 students

attended facilities in this district, the largest in that state. More than one third of the students lived in homes where English was not spoken as the primary language. Of the students, 62% received free or reduced-price lunches, and 68% were racial and ethnic minorities. The school district had not made adequate yearly performance during the past 2 years as required by No Child Left Behind legislation (U.S. Department of Education, Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008). Similar to the school district of the third participant, this school system was plagued with many of the same issues that impact urban schools across the country. Despite its beautiful weather and peaceful atmosphere, a sense of disorder and void existed within the district.

The final participant serviced a large public school district in the southwest. Before taking on this role she worked as a building administrator, turning around two underperforming schools and opening two very high-performing schools. Each one of the schools in which she served had a large minority population with at least 70% or more participating in free or reduced lunch.

### **Participants**

The participants for this research study were selected using a purposeful sampling method. The principal researcher selected “individuals for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). As Creswell (2007) reported, “One needs to find one or more individuals to study...who are accessible, willing to provide information, and distinctive for their accomplishments and...who shed light on a specific phenomenon or issue being explored” (p. 119). Individuals who were invited to participate in this study were women the principal researcher has known either personally, professionally or both, or were recommended to her by another participant. When a participant is recommended

by another, this is called snowballing sampling. This is an enrollment procedure in which research participants are asked to help researchers identify other possible subjects (Guidelines for Investigators, n.d.). Because the research involved the women disclosing intimate information, the researcher's prior relationships with them allowed her to hear their stories without a sense of violation and intrusion.

Because it is important that all "participants have experience with the phenomenon being studied" (Creswell, 2007, p. 128), the criteria used to select participants for this study were that each was (a) a self-identified educator who identified and/or adhered to the elements of womanism, (b) who have served or currently serve as educational leaders within predominately African-American urban schools, (c) were between the ages of 30 and 80, and (d) who could commit to the time needed to participate in the data collection methods chosen for this study.

Despite their similarities, the women represented various areas of the United States. Each of the participants has brought vast knowledge and experience to the field of education through a strong conviction and commitment to help young people have a meaningful educational experience. This vast knowledge came from being experienced professionals; all of the participants had more than 15 years of experience in education. Therefore, it could be inferred that they had a wealth of information from which to draw. In the event that an invited participant could not commit to taking part in the study, a snowballing technique was used, whereby the principal researcher requested that the participant suggest another possible participant based on the original criteria.

### **Recruitment**

The principal researcher had the email addresses of two of the participants prior to the study because they were known to her either personally or professionally. The other

email addresses were acquired as a result of snowballing sampling. The participants gave the researcher the contact information of two other women whom they deemed to be qualified to participate in the study. After securing the individual email addresses, the principal researcher sent an invitation by electronic mail to each participant, which included details about the study, a request to volunteer for participation, and a date to inform the researcher of their desire to participate. The invitation contained detailed information about the study, a clarification of the researcher's role in the study, the rationale for conducting the study, the voluntary nature of participating in the study, privacy rights, methods and instruments that would be utilized to collect data, and the ability for the participant to exit the study at any time (Glesne, 2005).

As a follow-up, the researcher contacted the participants by electronic mail to verify receipt of the correspondence and to inquire as to whether any questions or concerns existed. Participants had a week to decide whether they wanted to participate in the study. Because this study did not deal directly with the schools or the school districts in which the participants were employed, it was not necessary that the school systems be contacted for permission to conduct the study. Participation was a decision to be made solely by those who were invited. For the participants who were not able to meet in person, all face-to-face meetings and interviews were conducted through Skype, a telecommunications application that facilitates video chatting and voice calls from various technological devices. The participants who used Skype were required to sign their informed consent, scan it, and email it to the researcher.

### **Ethical Considerations**

While conducting the study, the researcher remained cognizant of ethical issues that could arise. These issues were organized into informed consent procedures and

included dishonesty or concealed activities; privacy toward participants, sponsors, and colleagues; benefits of research to participants over risks; and participant demands that go beyond normal expectations (Lipson, 1994). Therefore, when engaged in interviewing, the researcher was sensitive to the possibility of the research eliciting possible hurtful or forgotten memories and made a concentrated effort to respect individuality and refrain from forming judgments.

Each participant was given the opportunity to review the data collected during their individual interviews in order to ensure accurate information was taken and to allow them the opportunity to assess that adequate confidentiality was maintained. They were also asked to provide their own pseudonym. Finally, the researcher ensured each participant's confidentiality by storing all records in a secured file cabinet located in the researcher's home office, using pseudonyms, and not naming their institutions of employment.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through audio recordings of interviews. Therefore, interview protocols were used in the study (see Appendix B). The interviews served as the principal place where direct information was received from the participants. The interview questions were a culmination of topics collected through the review of literature. Although the questions were predetermined, the researcher presented the interviews in a conversational manner in reflection of the emergent nature of qualitative research. As Creswell (2012) emphasized, no planning can be tightly prescribed, and there must be room for flexibility.

In a natural setting, the researcher conducted three semistructured interviews with each participant. Using a semistructured interview style afforded the opportunity to begin

with initial categories and topics and present new topics within the parameters of the research questions (O'Hara, Carter, Dewis, Kay, & Wainwright, 2011). The additional benefits of conducting semistructured interviews included the opportunity for the interviewer to (a) respond to interviewees' questions and seek clarification of responses, (b) encourage more considered responses than might be possible using other approaches, and (c) remain flexible and able to adjust the aspect under discussion during the interview and follow up on relevant subtopics (O'Hara et al., 2011). An added advantage of using a semistructured interview was the depth and richness of the data gathered through the inquiry (Dickerson, 2012; Lal, Suto, & Ungar, 2012).

The next steps consisted of collecting and confirming all data received. During the interviews notes were taken in addition to the session being audio recorded. The audio recordings were then transcribed and the notes were organized and summarized. Then data were compiled in documents for review. To make sure each participant was in agreement with the information contained in the document review, they were sent a copy of the report via email. They were asked to review the report for authenticity and accuracy. At this time, they were given the opportunity to edit the material in order to change, clarify, or omit any information they wish. They were also asked to review, edit, and return their information within a week's time. The researcher did not hear from two of the participants and did not receive edited reports by the conclusion of a week; therefore each was contacted via email and telephone in order to obtain a status report. After making contact with the two participants, each woman confirmed reviewing the transcript and clarified that no edits were necessary.

### **Researcher Bias**

It is noteworthy that the researcher's personal and professional experiences served

as inspiration for this study. During the data collection, which required interaction with participants, the researcher endeavored to isolate all assumptions, thereby entering into the epoch phase. This is an example of Husserl's (1983) suggestion for investigators to "set aside their expectations, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (p. 60).

### **Procedures**

The principal researcher sent an email to those who agreed to participate with suggested times, dates, and locations for viewing, signing, and the collection of a letter of informed consent. After that email was sent, the principal researcher asked that each participant respond and indicate meeting preferences.

Once the letters of consent were signed, they were stored in both electronic and hardcopy forms in a password-protected computer storage area and a password-protected filing cabinet located in the principal researcher's home office. This portion of the recruitment included of a face-to-face meeting so that the principal researcher could explain to participants how information and participation would be maintained in extreme confidentiality.

The participants were assigned aliases in order to guarantee anonymity. The principal researcher contacted each participant to schedule all interview sessions. The interviews occurred using a face-to-face approach at a location agreed upon by both the researcher and the participants. It was intended that the face-to-face interviews would be conducted in an informal, yet private, location that was conducive to comfortable, nonthreatening, and trustworthy conversation. "A good interviewer never does anything to make respondents look or feel ignorant. You should be calm and reassuring [and] be attuned to the respondent's anxiety" (Glesne, 2006, p. 98). The telephone conversations

and interviews took place after work hours. Each interview lasted approximately two hours. However, considering the depth and length of the questions, the researcher informed each participant that more time may be necessary in order to complete the interviews and would work with them to schedule additional time if needed. In some cases, face-to-face interviews could not be completed due unforeseen circumstances that conflicted with the predetermined plan, such as travel and family illness. The researcher suggested that participation could be completed using Skype. Once the participant agreed to this option, a date was selected and the researcher informed the participant that their privacy would still be upheld. All Skyped interviews were conducted by the principal researcher in a location where the researcher would be alone.

Before beginning each interview, the researcher would “go over the purpose of the study, the amount of time needed to complete the interview, and the plans for using the results from the interview” with each participant (Creswell, 2007, p. 134). The three interview sessions covered various sections of selected interview questions, all of which were approved by the Institutional Review Board. The first interview addressed personal demographic information and the concept of multiple consciousnesses. The second interview addressed othermothering, the motherline, and motherwit, transgressive education, and activism. The final session covered the ethic of care and the participants’ educational philosophy. Each participant was asked the same questions and encouraged to elaborate on their responses (see Appendix B). The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to focus on the information and events they believed were most important in regard to how womanism is evident in their careers as educational leaders.

As soon as each interview was concluded, the handwritten notes that were taken during the interview were organized and arranged based on themes that emerged during

the discussion. “Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned” (Glesne, 2006, p.147). Additionally, all interviews were recorded. All recordings were transcribed by the principal researcher in order to provide opportunities to read the text repeatedly in an effort to acquire the overall essence from responses. In addition, the participants received a copy of all transcripts for further verification.

Next, the findings were written and presented in a completed dissertation report. The report is one that presents the emerging themes in a way that enables a holistic view of the experiences of the study’s participants.

Once the dissertation report was completed and a span of 36 months had passed, all video files, audio files, and email correspondence were destroyed by deleting and wiping the data from the computer system using the appropriate technological tools. All hard copies of data not returned to the participants were shredded and incinerated.

### **Analysis and Synthesis of the Data**

The researcher used the traditional phenomenological method of analysis and representation in order to process the data. This approach was recommended in the literature as a viable approach for fully analyzing the data (Brooks, Patterson, & McKiernan, 2012; Derakhshan & Singh, 2011). As part of the analysis phase and prior to analyzing and synthesizing the data from the participants, the principal researcher recorded an informal personal biography of her experiences with womanism as an educational leader. This was an effort to bracket, or put aside, biases and familiarity with the concept in order to focus on the participants of the study (Creswell, 2012). Husserl (1983) suggested that phenomenologists “exclude the entire natural world and all transcendent-eidetic spheres; by doing so [one] should acquire a ‘pure’ consciousness”

(p. 149). The researcher's bias was reduced by consciously being aware of personal experiences and setting them aside during the data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

There are those who view the reduction of bias as nearly impossible. Lavery (2003) explained this view:

These understandings are based on our historicity of being, and all understanding will involve some prejudice. Gadamer, scholar of hermeneutical phenomenology, did not support the notion that a knower can leave his/her immediate situation in the present merely by adopting an attitude. (p. 11)

However, in an attempt to extract pure descriptions and present nonbiased analysis, the researcher chose to begin with bracketing. This approach assisted in making the focus of this research central and setting aside everything else so that the complete research process was fixed solely on the topic and embedded questions (Moustakas, 1994).

Once bracketing was completed, the researcher then reviewed each of the transcribed interviews several times. An eight-step analytical process as outlined by Moustakas (1994) was followed:

1. Consider each statement, with special attention being paid to significance, in order to obtain a description of the experience.
2. Record all pertinent statements.
3. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement; these are the invariant, unchanging horizons or meaning units of the experience.
4. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes. (A list of themes are found in Chapter 4.)
5. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience.
6. Reflect on textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a

description of the structures of experience for each participant.

7. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences for each participant's experience.

8. "From the . . . descriptions of all participants' experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

### **In-Depth Explanation of Analysis and Synthesis of the Data**

Using horizontalization, the researcher was able to identify statements that specifically spoke to how the participants were experiencing womanism in their lives and composed a list of this information by giving each statement "equal value as I seek to disclose its nature and essence" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). Horizontalization is applied when the researcher "goes through the data and highlights 'significant statements,' sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, important phrases or sentences that pertained to womanism, leadership, and closing the achievement gap were identified and placed into themes that were common to all participants' transcripts. "Later, statements irrelevant to the topic and questions as well as those that are repetitive or overlapping are deleted, leaving only the horizons (the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon)" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

Resulting from the significant statements was clusters of meaning. Clusters of meaning develop when the researcher groups the statements into themes or meaning units, eliminating overlapping and repetitive statements (Moustakas, 1994). This process allowed the principal researcher to create noematic meanings or compose textural descriptions of the experiences. Therefore, the researcher was able to uncover and clarify,

as well as discover and separate, in an effort to clear what actually existed in the consciousness in order to find the “what” of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 30).

In order to disclose the way in which feelings and thoughts connected with womanism were aroused, the researcher considered the noetic factors in the themes.

These noetic, structural factors and dimensions account for the noematic themes.

Moustakas (1994) elaborated on noematic themes:

From an extensive description of the textures of what appears and is given, one is able to describe how the phenomenon is experienced. This means turning one’s focal attention to the conditions that precipitate the textural qualities, feelings, sense experiences, and thoughts, the structures that underlie textures and are intimately bound within them. (p. 78)

This aspect of research deals with the real components of the participant’s experiences and serves as a sort of justification or validation for the horizons that emerge.

Combining the noematic themes led to the creation of a textural-structural description of experience for each individual participant. This information then led to the composition of a composite textural-structural description. This description “combine[s] all textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). This aspect of the study served to provide a synthesis of meaning, capture the essence of the phenomenon, and represent the culminating aspect of the study (Creswell, 2012).

### **Limitations**

When one is conducting qualitative research, there is an abundance of opportunity for challenges to arise in the area of implementation. When conducting interviews, usually the challenge derives from the way in which the interviews are conducted (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, the researcher had to be prepared for anything that could have affected the validity of the research outcomes. The challenges that surfaced in this

study included scheduling conflicts or cancellations and issues with the recording devices. Creswell (2007) discussed some of the challenges of audio recording:

Audio recording raises issues for the qualitative researcher such as keeping disturbing room sounds to a minimum, deciding on the best equipment to use for recording, and determining the best location for recording that works to secure confidentiality and uninterrupted recording. (p. 140).

Another limitation that the researcher had to recognize was bias. Creswell (2012) reported that researchers will bring their own worldviews or beliefs into a research project. However, one must be aware that these beliefs and views can influence the process and outcomes of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings that resulted from a phenomenological study of African-American womanist educational leaders. The principal investigator utilized a phenomenological design because it was best suited to answer the research questions. This methodology permitted the development of a descriptive examination of the role womanism plays in the professional lives of African-American educational leaders and enabled the research to present the meaning revealed by this group of women and their “lived experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). The following topics will be discussed in this chapter: (a) participants’ demographic background information, (b) review of the research and interview questions, (c) presentation of findings, and (d) summary of key findings.

After obtaining formal IRB approval, the study commenced. A total of 12 face-to-face, telephone and Skype interviews were conducted with four African-American female educational leaders. Participants all worked within the primary and secondary educational arenas and identify themselves as a womanist and/or their educational leadership style exemplified the characteristics of the womanist framework. The principal investigator knew two of the participants personally, and the others were recruited using the snowballing technique.

Once the participants responded to the invitation email, the principal investigator made contact with them to answer preliminary questions that were established to verify that they met the inclusion criteria and to arrange their participation in the interview process. Additionally, all interviews were scheduled and took place in locations and times that were conducive to the schedule of each participant. When the principal investigator

conducted all telephone or Skype interviews, she did so in a private location where others could not hear the conversations. Before the initial interview began, all participants signed a copy of the participant's consent letter.

Each interview was audio recorded. After each session, the principal investigator downloaded the interview into a password protected electronic storage area. Additionally, the principal investigator took copious and detailed field notes during and after each interview—all of which were also placed in a password protected electronic storage area. When the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed. The principal investigator sent the transcriptions to each participant for confirmation of accuracy and authenticity. In order to continue to ensure their privacy and anonymity, each participant was asked if they wanted to provide their own pseudonym or understood that if not, one would be assigned to them by the principal investigator.

After transcriptions were generated, they were read as a whole and the principal investigator identified and designated terms, words, and phrases that resurfaced regularly and repeatedly in the data. The principal investigator then color-coded the selected terms, words, and phrases based on the different categories that began to emerge. From there, the categories were reexamined and finally a clear set of themes emerged. These themes were reviewed and analyzed. Then the themes were classified according to the appropriate research question to which they associated. Appendix B shows the alignment of the interview questions with each of the three research questions:

1. What do the characteristics of womanism mean to African-American female educational leaders?
2. What perceived role do womanist characteristics have in the professional practices and leadership styles of African-American female educational leaders?

3. What elements of womanism influence the African-American female educational leader's efforts in helping to close the achievement gap experienced by many students of color?

Supportive quotes were noted for each of the selected themes. The quotes represented the participants' perceptions in regard to answering the research questions.

### **Participant Demographics and Background Information**

**The rebel.** Thatcher Ulrich (2015) once stated, "Well-behaved women rarely make history." These words certainly describe the first participant, Cathy. She is feisty. You don't have to see her to pick this up; it is in her voice. In every syllable she utters, one hears persuasive boldness that commands respect and compliance automatically. Yet, there is also a sense of the familiar. She is down-to-earth and her conversation was easy for those few hours she shared of her time, but that is it. Cathy valued her time, and when the time was up, she was back to business until the next meeting. For a novice researcher, Cathy's matter-of-fact behavior was unsettling initially, yet that faded as she began a tale about her career in education that spanned more than 40 years.

Cathy knew what it meant to be an effective educator. She knew what it takes to turn around a low-performing school. She had done what many are still struggling to figure out and accomplish. As a result of her experience, Cathy's knowledge has been documented in books to help future and current principals provide better service to those under their leadership. However, what she knew and has learned came from a healthy self-confidence, research, trial and error, questioning, and her love for and belief that all children can achieve academic success.

These lessons have taken her from the elementary school classroom to the collegiate classroom, from the office of assistant principal and dean to principal of many

schools, then on to assistant superintendent of schools and having a school named in her honor. As a well-known and well-respected educational consultant touching the lives of many, as is helping to mold educational leaders all over the United States.

**The activist.** “Love builds....Our aim must be to create a world of fellowship and justice where no man’s skin, color or religion, is held against him” (McLeod Bethune, 2015, para. 6). These words by seemed to echo those spoken by the second participant, Saniyah, during the interviews. Saniyah was a firm believer that change can be created through children.

When the principal investigator interviewed Saniyah and began the session on activism, Saniyah immediately stated the following:

I am called a world-child activist. I am a person of integrity...It is okay to challenge mindsets and to speak up. Someone has to stand up for children’s rights. It is a ministry, a calling. I have learned my strength and power.

After listening to her story, it became clear to the principal researcher how all of the facets of Saniyah’s experiences culminated in the powerful force she is today.

As most with a sincere calling to act on behalf of humanity, Saniyah knew early on in her childhood that she had a responsibility to stand up for those who could not fight for themselves. This avocation would later manifest itself in the form of an elementary school teacher. She held this position for six years while taking on various leadership roles. The positions and accomplishments that resulted from her efforts did not go unnoticed and she did what is usually unheard of in the field of educational leadership—she led her own school while coming directly out of the classroom. She turned this school around, and what began as a low-performing, deteriorating entity became a beautiful, thriving school where students came first. This was evident by the cries from parents, staff, and students when they heard she was moving on.

Saniyah went on to serve as an assistant principal and point person for severe disabilities in a large school district. While there, her hard work was recognized and the city acknowledged her as one of the Top Fifteen to Watch in 2009. She remained with this school system for 5 years and then transitioned into a career working with educational reformist as a consultant to district superintendents, principals, other administration, and classroom educators. She felt that, in this position, she was able to really act on the behalf of those underserved because her influence was no longer localized, but national.

**The motivator.** The third participant was Reba. While interviewing Reba, the famous quote by Williamson (2015) came to the principal researcher's mind. Williamson asserted, "We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world" (p. 1). Reba recognized her power and embraced it. Regarding her hypersensitivity to the perceptions others have of her, she stated, "I recognize I have a presence, and that sometimes makes people feel uncomfortable." This presence and discernment have been what had both catapulted and impeded upon her career as an educational leader. Reba's career has spanned the classroom to the boardroom—boardrooms with some of the county's most powerful people in the field of education. However, for Reba, this journey was all in an effort to serve, which was her life's purpose.

In high school and college, Reba always knew that whatever career she decided upon, it was going to have something to do with science. Therefore, after graduating from college she worked in a chemical adhesive laboratory. She excelled at this and was soon promoted within the company. However, an unfortunate situation that removed her from

the company soon exposed her to a field with which she never expected to fall in love. After giving birth to her son, she began working as a substitute teacher. When describing the way she felt about teaching she asserted, “This job was addicting!” She requested more opportunities within the school and soon went from a long-term substitute to a certified classroom teacher.

The growth experienced by her students, the work she did to encourage her fellow coworkers, and the extracurricular opportunities she provided the students caught the attention of leadership and she was encouraged to consider administrative work. Her first experience as director of summer school proved to be exhilarating and she knew this was the right direction in which to move. As a result, she applied for and was accepted into a very challenging and highly respected alternative administration certification program. After completing the program and internship, she was hired to run her own school, one to which she has been credited for having moved completely from failing to thriving. Over the next several years, Reba worked in two other schools in the role of principal before transitioning into educational reform. As an educational reformist, she has worked as a coach and consultant for administrators within a large school district specializing in school turnaround and teacher evaluations. Additionally, she has led teams that were assembled to create and train principals on teacher evaluation tools, techniques, and rubrics.

**The advocate.** Aniyah was the fourth participant in this study. A quote by McLeod Bethune (2015) exemplified the Aniyah’s beliefs in regard to the role of education. “We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power towards good ends” (para. 16). Aniyah asserted, “My life has taught me the importance of advocating for

what is right, until you can't advocate anymore." Aniyah's view on the role of advocating was most prevalent when she spoke about children. Coming from a background most would consider disadvantaged actually proved to be the complete opposite. Although terminally ill and not able to financially support Aniyah and her siblings, Aniyah's mother provided something much more priceless and lasting: She taught Aniyah to think critically. She taught her how to be responsible. She taught her to recognize and acknowledge her self-worth, and she nurtured her children with so much love that it overshadowed the material things she could not provide.

This same love was what Aniyah brought into the classrooms she served as a teacher and into the leadership roles she took on. Although a career in education was not where she imagined she would end up, it did make sense. Aniyah began working at the age of 14. During this time she worked in the fast food circuit. Later she moved on to other jobs in customer service. What stuck with her about all of these jobs was the joy she experienced through service. She enjoyed helping and providing. As life progressed, Aniyah took on other positions in the service field and excelled at them all. Being promoted was not a surprise, but an expectation, because she worked so hard. This became very evident when she was named chief executive officer for a philanthropic organization created on behalf of a famous deceased celebrity. During her time with this organization, Aniyah received numerous awards for her efforts. Additionally, this experience took her all over the world and showed her the importance of other people of color seeing an African-American woman in a position of influence.

Needing to be closer to home led her into the field of education. At that time in her life, it made sense. She loved to serve, provide, give back, and to protect. Once in her own classroom, she thrived. She was Mama Williams to so many of her students. This

mothering manifested in the expectations she had for her students, the way she related to them, and the love they showed her in return. They began to thrive under her tutelage and people noticed. Parents requested she continuously loop with their children, and district personnel used her as a model for effective teaching and learning. She wrote articles about her experiences, and articles were written about her. She found herself on panels at prestigious institutions of higher learning and as the focus of a short documentary aired on a national news channel. However, the biggest joy she found was in the fact that she could “impact children to achieve beyond their immediate present.”

As a result of so many people taking notice of her skill sets and her affinity for leadership, she joined and climbed the ladder within the educational reformist movement. At the time this study was conducted, Aniyah served the organization as the only African-American to oversee teacher training within a district for the entire company.

### **Presentation of Findings**

This section of the chapter will present the findings from the individual participant interviews. Additionally, data results and analysis will also be presented. Following this section, a review of the key findings will conclude this chapter.

As described in the Procedures section, the interviews were transcribed and read repeatedly by the researcher. Then terms, words, and phrases were color-coded to allow for various categories to emerge. Finally, after reexamination, a final set of themes were developed. Appendix C illustrates the final themes that emerged from the individual participant interviews.

The nine themes represented all the participants’ responses from all of the individual interviews and are a way to begin to explain how the elements of womanism impact educational leadership as perceived by the participants. The responses in

Appendix C were then used to address the research questions of this study.

Table 1 shows the theme tally, illustrating the regularity of responses for each theme and the number of times it surfaced in the transcriptions. Once the themes were determined, the principal researcher studied the number of frequency responses related to each theme throughout all the transcriptions. Then the number of times each theme surfaced within the transcriptions was totaled. Table 1 clearly identifies *Mentors is a Must* as the theme most frequently mentioned (23 occurrences), and *Activism* as the theme least frequently mentioned (10 occurrences).

Table 1

*Theme Tallies*

Themes	Number of responses
A Mentor is a Must	23
Teacher Leadership	20
Activism	10
Overcoming Stereotype	21
A Strong Sense of Self	15
A Vocation	15
Breaking Barriers	17
Care	19
High Expectations	17

For Tables 2-4, the themes were aligned according to what research question they address. All nine themes were examined and grouped according to the specific research question they addressed (displayed in the left column of Table 2). The transcriptions were then reexamined and significant quotes from each individual interview were selected. Finally, the quotes were narrowed down to the four to eight that exemplified the average responses for each theme (displayed in the right column of Table 2).

Table 2 displays evidence supporting Research Question 1, presenting the themes that address the research question and the supporting quotes that exemplify the theme.

Research Question 1 was: What do the characteristics of womanism mean to African

American female educational leaders? The themes for Research Question 1 were a strong sense of self, breaking of barriers, and education as a vocation.

Table 2

*Evidence Supporting Themes Related to Research Question 1*

Themes	Evidence to support the theme
A Strong Sense of Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I go in with the intent to transform. I go in to set systems right. To take the bull out. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I have learned my strength and power. I love to change mindsets and it is okay and I am good with that. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I learned one of the hardest lessons. You cannot always go in hard with the cleanup mentality. You may have to come in softly and ramp up your team, then proceed. (Reba)</li> <li>• I have never allowed anyone to hold me back. (Cathy)</li> <li>• I like to stay true to who I am and still win people over. (Aniyah)</li> <li>• I went from straight from a classroom teacher to a principal. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• She was hungry for knowledge. Everything was researched based. She made sure you knew your shit. (Saniyah)</li> </ul>
Breaking Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know the law and policy. Surprisingly, most admin don't. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• When I was a classroom teacher, before we started anything I helped them understand the purpose of why they were here and how education served as a means to advancement. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• For these children, education is the only way out. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• The mentor group had boys who hated reading, sneaking away to finish a chapter we had started or to move ahead. (Reba)</li> <li>• My skill level, who I was and how I ran my schools enabled me to achieve every goal I get for myself. What I did not know, I found out. What I needed my teachers to do, I modeled. (Cathy)</li> <li>• I reach kids by writing music. A lot of messages and information are hidden in the lyrics I use to communicate with them. (Aniyah)</li> </ul>
Education as a Vocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I live according to my spirit, like my former principal, and like her I have a peace because where I serve and work is my calling. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• "Reba, you have the gift." This was the moment the idea of education as a calling opened up for me. (Reba)</li> <li>• It is nothing less than a ministry. When I think of the patience of an educator I think of the patience of Job. (Aniyah)</li> <li>• There is a science to it, but the very essence of it is a calling. My motto is I have to be about my Father's business. If you aren't about children you got to go. I have a problem with you. I pity the fool who mess with my children. (Aniyah)</li> </ul>

Table 3 displays evidence supporting Research Question 2, presenting the themes that address the research questions and the supporting quotes that exemplify the theme.

Research Question 2 was: What perceived role do womanist characteristics have in the professional practices and leadership styles of African-American female educational

leaders? The themes for Research Question 2 were a mentor is a must, activism, and overcoming stereotypes.

Table 3

*Evidence Supporting Themes Related to Research Question 2*

Themes	Evidence that supports a theme
A Mentor is a Must	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She took me under her wing and became my mentor immediately. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• She cared about every aspect of my life. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I started mentoring because you have to have someone mentor you. (Cathy)</li> <li>• We connected because we were both women in a male dominated aspect of the profession. (Aniyah)</li> <li>• I can still be authentically me, yet I can push for the conversation to be had wherever I see that something is unjust or unethical. (Saniyah)</li> </ul>
Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We did this campaign. It wasn't as big as I felt we needed it to be but it was noticeable. Grassroots, before I knew what it was. (Reba)</li> <li>• I believe in the rights of all children. (Cathy)</li> <li>• It has been more impactful, that I don't come from privilege, because I can be the voice of those not represented at the decision table. (Aniyah)</li> <li>• ...someone not afraid to speak against the norm. (Saniyah)</li> </ul>
Overcoming Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am aware of what being Black, young, of a darker hue and with natural hair has had on my life and professional experience. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I knew I wanted to teacher in a predominately white setting in order to combat stereotypes. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I try to view and show up with the understanding that we are all human and to demonstrate that awareness with all I meet and interact with. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I already dress well, but I try to make sure that I am very classy so that I can counter their perceptions of who they think black people are, which are simply based in experiences I had as a child. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• Colorism is more of a conflict within the black race. In my experience white men love dark skin women. Even if they dislike me, the always complement my complexion. What women usually don't respond at all, but if they do it is usually positive. Black men are kind of like white women, it is not an issue. However, Black women, they comment a lot. For example, they will say things like, "You are pretty to be dark skin." Color is so deep in our race and even worldwide. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• You look like you just got off the boat. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• The big thing in education reform is having honest conversation, but when a woman of color voices her concerns in a way that is seen as confident within her own community, it is taken with shock and discomfort in other settings. (Reba)</li> <li>• Racism was a footnote or insignificant to me. (Cathy)</li> <li>• I have had to deal more with not coming from a privileged background. It surfaces in my language. I speak like a black person and people will either tune me out or half listen because of assumptions. (Aniyah)</li> </ul>

Table 4 displays evidence supporting Research Question 3, presenting the themes

that address the research questions and the supporting quotes that exemplify the theme. Research Question 3 asked: What elements of womanism influence the African-American female educational leaders' efforts to close the achievement gap experienced by many African-American students? The themes for Research Question 3 were teacher leadership, care, relationship building, and high expectations.

Table 4

*Evidence Supporting Themes Related to Research Question*

Themes	Evidence that supports theme
Teacher Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I started a step team that performed for the mayor. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• By the second semester of my 2nd year, I was grade leader. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I was in the directory of exemplary teachers. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I started peer walk-throughs before admin requested it. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• During my first year teaching my students' scores went up by twenty percentage points. (Reba)</li> <li>• I spread my wings at this school. (Reba)</li> <li>• My parents called the principal and requested that I loop with my students. (Aniyah)</li> </ul>
Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I had to hear, "I care about kids." I could care less about grade point average, the school you attending, and your resume. I would take someone wet behind the ears who cared for kids, and train them. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• The more we go in and can take care of our whole self, we can change children. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I recognize that even though they were reflective and forward thinking people they still had preconceived notions about the capabilities of all children and that impacted the way they cared for the kids. (Reba)</li> <li>• You have to love the children you teach. (Cathy)</li> <li>• We saw that as care, because it sounded like our grandmothers. She spoke our language. (Aniyah)</li> </ul>
High Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know how a school needs to run in order to achieve excellence. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• High expectations is cyclical. Parents should have high expectations for the students and teachers. The students should have high expectations of the teachers and administration. The teachers should have high expectations of the students and administration. The administration should have high expectations of teachers and students. (Saniyah)</li> <li>• I needed to make sure they were willing to put in the work because I had very high expectations. (Cathy)</li> <li>• I took at school that ranked number 88 out of 88 schools, to number one within four years. (Cathy)</li> <li>• I can't imagine a principal hiring a teacher without looking at them first, especially with the convenience of the Internet. (Cathy)</li> </ul>

## **Narrative Summary of Findings for Research Question 1**

What do the characteristics of womanism mean to African-American female educational leaders? The responses to this question served as a foundation for understanding how African-American female educational leaders embrace and exemplify womanist characteristics within their professional lives. In order to generate the responses needed to answer the research question, this portion of the interview centered on the nuances of each of the womanist characteristics. Consequently, the following themes represent the meaning womanist characteristics have in the lives of the participants: a strong sense of self, breaking of barriers, and education as a vocation.

**A sense of self: Saniyah.** Most people would agree that Saniyah is breathtakingly beautiful. She is not the all-American beauty, but she possesses a universal appeal that stops people in their tracks. When you see her she is impeccably dressed, almost strategically. Every piece of jewelry is chosen for a purpose. Each stone is selected for its meaning and the size for its impact and effect. Every locked curl of her hair is delicately put in place and her makeup is carefully applied so that it is natural and soft. When asked about the meticulousness that surrounds her aesthetics she explained:

First impressions are everything. There are those few times when I go in knowing I am a young Black woman, so I am already aware of how I am going to be perceived. Therefore, even though I already dress well, I try to make sure I am extremely classy and sophisticated. I make sure my nails are polished, my makeup is on point. I look very classy. My jewelry is very classy. I try to look very expensive. There is nothing about me that will play into who I think they perceive me to be based on my assumptions or experiences. I have heard the comments about Black women being hood rats, loud, or that they don't smell good. So, in an effort to counter the perceptions of who they think Black people are, all of which again, are based on my childhood assumptions and experiences, I do those things. As a result, I know I am going to change their perceptions about me and I am going to change who they think a Black woman is that day.

For children, I want them to gain new understandings of what it means to be beautiful. We live in an environment that dictates what that means. Well, just as I

encourage them to seek their own understanding in everything they do and see, physical beauty is not omitted from this.

For my brother and sisters, I am countering self-hate. There are Black women who say things to me like, “You are pretty to be dark skin,” “I love your complexion,” or “You look like you just got off the boat.” It is one of two things. They are surprised to see an attractive woman with clearly African features, or they assume you are the conscious/revolutionary type.

However, I relish in opportunities to talk about this issue. So, when someone ask me, “Oh my god, is that your hair?” I am not offended because this opening lends itself to authentic conversation that challenges stereotypes and opens minds. Plus, all of this is my way of defining for myself what beauty is. I am beautiful and it isn’t based on anybody’s standards, but my own. I get this strength from my ancestors.

Yet, despite the intentional focus on her outward appearance, it is her inner beauty that often takes people by surprise. It is that beauty that incessantly shines through, even when she is fiery passionate or focused uncompromisingly. This is what Saniyah works so hard to cultivate because it serves as the foundation for what she does with and for children.

Through my work, and specifically the challenging times, I have learned my strength and power. I am a person of integrity and it is okay for me to challenge mindsets and to speak up. Someone has to stand up for children’s rights. It is a ministry—a calling. My professional experiences have allowed me to tap into a whole other level of power and influence. I now know that I know what it takes to turn around a school. I know what excellence looks like and I know how to bring that out in educators, period.

**Breaking barriers: Saniyah.** The confidence Saniyah possesses is not unwarranted. She has managed to use the acquisition of knowledge and the application of practicing what she has learned to break down walls in her profession, for herself and for others. Coming into the world of education she had goals.

I knew that I wanted to come in and immediately learn everything I could because my plan was to be a principal by 30. This was for two reasons. I wanted children to see that age was just a number and that you can achieve heights beyond your imagination at any time in your life and also I wanted them to see a black woman do this.

Saniyah achieved each one of the goals she set out to accomplish. As a classroom

teacher, she became a model educator who quickly began to tackle leadership responsibilities. Her ability to learn fast put her into the position of principal before the age of 30. Her influence was so monumental that upon hearing that she decided to leave the school, parents got together and petitioned her in an effort to convince her stay.

Within 30 minutes of hearing the news, parents were outside boycotting for the board to choose a new management company and for me to stay. Before this moment I knew I had made a difference in the lives of my school community, but I don't think I understood the impact until that very moment. It was devastating.

In order to accomplish what she had at this school, Saniyah had to come in and organize. At times this required removing things or people that were not furthering the mission.

I loved the experience, but nobody told me I was there to clean house. My goal was to get quality teachers, and to expose the kids to a global society and to quality education. So, by the end of the year, half of the old teachers were gone. The kids had this song they would sing, "Dunt dunt dunt, another one bites the dust!" It was even a big ordeal when I hired the first White teacher or required a teacher do a mini lesson in front of students as a part of their interview. Despite the measures I had to take, when people would come to the school they would walk in and immediately say things like, "It is just so peaceful."

**A vocation: Saniyah.** When asked to elaborate on what made leaving her position so devastating, she described what she believed she gave to the school community, how it thrived as a result, and how the members were afraid they would lose what they had if she left. This unnerved her as well, considering it was customary for a principal to remain at a school for at least three years to see real impact. Yet, in her heart, she knew that she had planted seeds that would grow and the children would be fine. This confidence came from her belief that her work was more than a job, but a ministry or a vocation.

I realized, through this experience, that I can be authentically me and push for greatness. I learned that I can transform a school from low-performing to

outstanding and that I don't have to be an educational messiah to accomplish my mission. Yet, it is the understanding that what I do is all spiritual. It's my life's calling to transform the world through children and to create better educational opportunities for those disenfranchised—all children for that matter. Therefore, I can be unapologetic about student achievement.

**A sense of self: Cathy.** Prior to having a conversation with Cathy, one could make many assumptions and generalizations about her based simply on her resume. There are not too many people who are still alive and have buildings named in their honor (not for their financial contributions, but for their hard work and results). Cathy is a person who can boast this honor. Yet, she did not. She was clearly about her business, but it was easy to detect her warmth and wisdom. She spoke with confidence, but with a confidence steeped in a sort of contagious self-assurance to which others find themselves attracted and entranced by.

I grew up during the Civil Rights Movement. I participated in sit-ins at the local Woolworths. Our books were hand me downs, and yet our teachers gave us a really good education. Together, with my parents they loved on us and taught us that we could do anything we put our minds to. Plus, my parents taught me and my siblings that we were just as good as anybody else. We were also taught that we weren't the ones with the problem, it was those with the hatred. I grew up thinking this.

So, I have never allowed my blackness or the fact that I am female to stop me from being who I needed to be and stop what I needed to get done. Like I said, I have a high degree of self-esteem. I feel really good about who I am. I knew I was highly competent and I did not let my color or how people saw me deter me from what I know I could do.

**Breaking barriers: Cathy.** Many would consider entering educational administration in a predominately White school district a daunting task, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. However, this was not a concern for Cathy. Her concern was to provide the best leadership she could in an effort to ensure the students she was responsible for providing the best education possible. Therefore, when obstacles emerged, she took effective steps to remove them.

I remember they were trying to do away with phonics in the schools and my school was incredibly successful using this instructional method. It was the era of the whole language movement, about 20 to 25 years ago. They brought all of the elementary principals together because they were trying to push this in all of the schools. They brought some people in and I sat there and listened to their presentation and I was like, “Oh my gosh!” After they were finished and it was time for questioning, I raised my hand and said, “My teachers do not know how to teach the way you are talking about. All of my kindergarten students are reading simple books. All of my first graders are reading at or above grade level. Our kids are scoring at the very top of the district. Now, you want me to stop what we are doing to do this, when what we are doing is working? And when are you going to train my teachers at my building, considering you want to roll this out by the first of the year. How is this going to work?” I interrupted the whole meeting with that question. Everybody was giving me high-fives!

Then I said, “For those schools that are not having success, then fine. More power to you. However for my school where we are having success...I don’t see how this is going to work for us.” So, when the meeting was over, the assistant superintendent said, “That was kind of embarrassing.” I said, “Before you begin, Barbara, I am sorry, but I am not doing this. I am not telling my teachers to throw out their Basil Readers. I am not going to tell students to stop sounding out bat, cat, hat, and sat. Now, remove me from my position and do whatever you need to do, but I am not going to tell my teachers to do this.” After that she just said, “I’ll talk to you later.” That was the end of it.

But you see, I had to fight things like that. I knew what would work for my kids and I was not going to let anything stop their success.

**A vocation: Cathy.** Cathy felt she made the most difference in the lives of children as an instructional leader. She explained that as a classroom teacher she could touch the lives of approximately 30 children, but as a principal she could impact thousands.

I enjoyed every role that I was in. However, the one I enjoyed most was the elementary school principalship, especially since on two occasions I got to open up the school. I had very very high expectations for everyone. I had to make sure that everyone involved was willing to put in the work. Luckily, I was able to choose top-notch teachers who were willing to do the type of work required to make a real difference in the life of kids. That is the only reason I am here. I am not here for teachers, but for students. I always told my staff and I tell those today who I consult, “We are following the Golden Rule. Treat these students the way you would want someone to treat your children.”

**A sense of self: Reba.** When speaking to Reba, the principal researcher was met

with a wonderful array of contradictions. Reba was tough, yet nurturing. She pushed, yet she coddled. She was a fireball, but incredibly sensitive. She had gone from the lab room to the boardroom. She was a teacher, but she was always learning. She had fallen, but she has gotten back up. It was her humility and openness that enabled the researcher to feel her authenticity and appreciate her journey.

It was this very journey that helped her become the force she is today in the world of education. When she spoke, it was hard to imagine she had been anything but successful her entire life. She was polished. She was a timeless beauty. It was like watching the first lady of the United States, but having a conversation with an old friend. Her conversation with the principal researcher was one girded in self-reflection, research, application, and practice.

Part of my journey is to acknowledge that I am a leader. I recognize I have a powerful presence and that sometimes makes people feel uncomfortable. When you show up as light you obliterate darkness, but it forces others to examine their places of darkness. Internally, they want to ask questions like, “Why you just so bright? Why you can’t just turn yours down?”

Beyond that I see that I take on the role of the coach in the lives of so many, although it is usually not intentional. People seem to seek me out and I am okay with that. I am one who pushes for people to be their best.

**Breaking barriers: Reba.** There were many areas in Reba’s life in which barriers had been broken. As with many of the other participants, Reba had served as a principal before the age of 30 and she had turned around schools that were struggling. However, during the frequent times she found herself the only representative of her ethnicity and the only person who was not an alumna of an Ivy League college when sitting at tables where educational policy was being made, she was cognizant of the walls she was helping to bring down.

I grew up with parents of the Civil Rights Movement. I remember growing up

with the mantra, “You have to be better than...” So when I really got deep into educational policy I began seeing people who went to Harvard, Columbia, and Yale. Everyone went to Ivy Leagues. I am not exaggerating. They were smart as hell. That is when I decided I wanted to go. I felt I needed to make an impact in education, and therefore I needed to same credentials.

However, I did not get into to the program I applied to. It hurt something awful, but not getting in taught me that I did not need Harvard—I needed Him. He, taught me that all that I needed, He had already given me. It was frightening at first. Everyone in the room seemed smarter than me and despite what some may think, it wasn’t a white thing. It was an Ivy League thing. I got present to the differences in the quality of education in our county, meaning there is a higher level of quality that I didn’t have access to. It is really an economic issue. I sat and I listened. I heard a pace of thought, of thinking and processing, that was ninety times faster than anything that I have ever been around. It wasn’t because they were smatter, but they were put in settings that demanded this kind of pace of thinking, reasoning, problem-solving, and communication.

So, basically, even though it isn’t a race thing, because of the economic disparities facing minorities in this country, you will be the only one in the room and you wear the whole race on your shoulders and you have to come with it. I had to learn how to be competent and successful in that environment. What I came back to was that I had to be true to who I was. My voice had to be my voice. My process had to be my process. I don’t have to do it like you to be good. I have to do it like me and work my thing and I will be great. It’s funny, but when I first started my initial evaluations were terrible. I remember one of my managers asked me, “How did you managed as a principal?” I said, “I had a secretary.” You know, ironically, I had to stop caring. When I did, things changed fast and dramatically.

People started to see the results I achieved and people began to listen. However, I did it my way. I knew things were different when I got invited to go to the US Department of Education to participate on a team who would be speaking with Arne Duncan. It was a team of a bunch of VPs, the President, and then me. When I got the email invite, I remember thinking, “This must be a mistake.” So, I called our president. He said, “You were recommended. I asked who can really talk about the work that we do when we go speak with Duncan and I was told—you.”

**A vocation: Reba.** The role spirituality plays in Reba’s life was very apparent to the principal researcher when interviewing her. Much of what she has accomplished she attributed to her relationship with God. However, in regards to education, she offered the simple explanation:

I was going to be a doctor, but God had other plans. He told me, “Yes, I have

gifted you to heal but it will not be through western medicine.” So, it’s funny. I sit back and even I am amazed at how He is using me to help heal others through my work in education.

**A sense of self: Aniyah.** Aniyah quickly told the principal researcher that her background did not guarantee nor predict the success she had experienced in her life thus far.

I was the daughter of a single mother who had three children...I didn’t have much support from my dad. My mother became terminally ill and I had to start working at the age of 14. I remember that I had to catch two buses and two trains every weekend and gave the entire check to my mother considering she has just begun her medical treatments.

Yet, having to be so responsible at such an early age and the richness of wisdom that her mother provided served as the foundation for who Aniyah is today.

I loved working. I love working with people and helping people. It was an escape from being the most responsible person in the house. It was the service part of my employment that appealed to me the most. I’d say at about seventy-five percent of my jobs, I got promoted because of this—my gift for working with people and interacting with them. This is why education was such a natural fit for me. It was always in the back of my mind. Plus, I loved children. So, I guess you can say they were good experiences. You know, once you get the taste of being promoted you always want to go to each job and go above and beyond, so you leave better than you came in.

When asked to elaborate on what made her successful in each one of the roles in her career trajectory, she said

Being relentless, being tenacious, being steadfast, and having a strong spiritual foundation. It is nothing like seeing people flourish. Also, I advocate for myself. When you grow up and one parent is sick and the other isn’t there, you learn to campaign or fight for yourself. This also put me on a path to always want to advocate and fight for others until I can’t fight anymore.

She also talked about the importance she placed on being a strategic thinker.

I use to think that everyone did things based on the passion they had in their heart, but no. People are strategic. So, I learned to be a critical thinker and to put strategy behind everything that I do so it will benefit me and everyone else involved.

**Breaking barriers: Aniyah.** One area in which Aniyah had to be strategic was language and communication. As a result of not growing up “privileged,” she was very surprised at the communication barriers that existed between those who come from very affluent economic backgrounds and those who did not. Therefore, she had to turn what would normally be a barrier into something that would benefit her as an educational leader and reformer.

So here is the thing, for me I think what has been more impactful is the big differences between those people that come from privilege and those that don't. When you don't come from a certain background, but yet you want to help that population of people you have to die to yourself and try to adapt and learn all about that community of people.

That is why I get frustrated at times with the barriers in communication. I think women and men speak different languages, but I definitely think black people and white people speak totally different languages and it messes things up because we all want the best. Well, for the most part, people want the best for other people but the language barriers can cause communication to come off condescending sometimes, and patronizing.

When you are in a situation where you are not always face-to-face, like a virtual call, the way you sound is everything. Think about an artist on the radio. You may not know what they look like, but based on the way they sound you begin to make judgment calls about that person. Language is everything. Communication is everything. I know in my professional career, I may not always say the words or the things that typical educational reformers do. I am not going to speak like the majority speaks. I am going to speak the way that I want to speak. Now, I do think it is important to use Standard English or communication friendly English. However, when I speak people already know that I am Black. That alone, for some people is going to diminish credibility about what I have to say or they may not listen as hard. I am not going to say catch phrases or words that everyone is saying because everyone read the same article. You know, like the word-of-the-month? Language is huge with race. Before you see me, you hear me and automatically there are those who are turned off because it is not indigenous to what they are used to. So, at that point, people are uneasy being outside of their comfortable norms.

Since I know it is an issue. It fuels me. I am competitive my nature, so I like to prove that I can still be a truly who I am as a black person and remain true to myself and still win people over. That really has driven me. It has encouraged me to speak the language of the people, do things with simplicity and understanding, let passion fuel everything I do, and do all of this while still showing my

intelligence. Honestly, it benefits me more not to sound like the average education reformer, which people associate with white women from privilege. It has driven me as an educational leader and quite honestly made me most successful because I can touch the heart of the average man and not only those who are privileged to know the theoretical rhetoric, bull-junk jargon.

**A vocation: Aniyah.** During the interview, Aniyah consistently spoke about the love that surrounded her upbringing. However, she was also very candid about what was missing. Her economic situation did not allow her the exposure to all of the options life had to offer. As a result, she was able to grab at what she could see, but had no knowledge of what was possible.

I didn't grow up knowing about things like Ivy League. It was nothing that my mom talked to me about because we were just really trying to survive. I didn't know what opportunities were out there and I guess I really didn't understand the concept of education being a Civil Rights movement and being one of the great equalizers. So the fact that I can inspire kids and leave them with something beyond our immediate presence is huge—like major. I think that's part of my life's work. Doing what I can do for those less fortunate, which includes children who can't always stand for themselves.

Yeah, it is nothing less than a ministry. When I think of the patience of a teacher I think of the patience of Job. Doing this with decency and order. Doing things with love. Letting love fuel everything you do. Christ was a teacher. It is a ministry. To be able to control thirty plus children and you can't use certain types of discipline. There is a science to it, but the very essence of it is a calling. My motto is I have to be about my father's business. If you aren't about children, you got to go. I have a problem with you. I pity the fool who mess with my children. I can count the students who have me listed as an emergency contact. I know what my accountability is to children. The angels of children are to the right and the left of God. They are in constant communication with God. It is my life's work. Once an adult, twice a child. You might want to get it right while you are able.

### **Discussion of Participants' Narrative Data**

In summation, three main themes emerged regarding what the characteristics of womanism mean to African-American female educational leaders. For these women, it meant creating and maintaining a strong sense of self. As a result, life experiences helped them form who they wanted to be in this world and how they wanted to show up in the

world of education. It meant being cognizant of how others perceived them. It did not mean allowing those perceptions to determine how they viewed themselves, but helping them relate to other people who may be different. Womanism also meant overcoming obstacles in order to continue progressing. Each participant had encountered situations that could have impeded their influence and success or those of others; each sought ways to remove those barriers. For these women, their profession was not simply employment, but their life's work as a calling. Each woman saw her work as a contribution to humanity.

### **Narrative Summary of Findings for Research Question 2**

What perceived role do womanist characteristics have in the professional practices and leadership styles of African-American female educational leaders? In order to determine the role of womanism in the profession and leadership practices of the participants, the researcher asked questions intending to produce responses that represented how each of the womanist characteristics manifest in the participants' professional practices. The themes that emerged from Research Question 2 were: a mentor is a must, activism, and overcoming stereotypes.

**A mentor is a must: Saniyah.** From the very beginning of her matriculation through school and throughout her educational journey, Saniyah had influential and caring mentors. These individuals, all of various races, ages, and spiritual beliefs, helped to guide her as an educational leader.

There was this teachers' fair at our university. While there I met two sistas. They were tight women. Both were principals at two different schools and they happened to be friends. I spoke with each of them and a few weeks later both ladies contacted me about a position at their respective schools. I interviewed with each, but it was something about Dr. Benjamin. Her interview was the last one, and when I sat down with her she said with friendly competitiveness, "I am sure you had a nice time with Pam, but my school is better. I guarantee you will end

today making the right choice.” I knew then that there was something special about Dr. Benjamin and I did end up choosing her school.

I fell in love with the school, mainly because of the presence of the principal and the diversity of the student population. She was a tall black woman with short natural hair and walked around like she owned the place. She did not speak “proper” for lack of better wording, but she was large and in charge. She had so many races of people under her leadership and she brought us all together.

At the interview, I brought my portfolio and was ready to have her peruse through it as all educators are taught to expect during the interview, but she did not want to see that. She wanted to hear me. I wasn’t prepared for that, but we did talk. It was at this time I told her my goal of becoming a principal. From that moment on she became my mentor. Anything I wanted to do, I led. During a moment of doubt, I remember her calling me into her office. She said, “I don’t know why you are doubting yourself. You can do it now and you will do it, so go do it!”

Benjamin was but one of the many mentors who served as guidance throughout Saniyah’s educational journey. Another woman who was influential to her career and personal development was Barbara Jordan. As a woman who prides herself on being attentive to her intuition and following it, Saniyah was led to a position on the other side of the country. Not knowing what to expect, she placed a call to have an interview and during this time she met Jordan.

I knew it was the right situation. I knew it! We talked for three hours that day. Barbara was so knowledgeable. She was hungry for knowledge and everything she said was researched based. She made sure you knew your shit. You couldn’t get anything past her. She the first white woman I had ever met, who openly admitted to having biases and entitlement at times, and encouraged conversations about this. However, Barb was free. She created a family atmosphere. We could fight like cats and dogs, but loved each other the next minute.

I did not know much about what I was getting into and about Special Education, but she pushed me out there. Whatever I needed to know she told me and if I could not find something, she led me to it. Towards the end of my experience, I remember her saying, “I have taken you as far as I can. I know you can go far, but I think now you need a powerful black female mentor.” We still keep in touch, though. She is now like an aunt.

**Activism: Saniyah.** When addressing the element of activism within her professional experience, Saniyah said, “They call me Assata Shakur.” That response

immediately evoked the image of the fearless revolutionary emboldened and driven by her convictions. Like Shakur, a former member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army, and who remains a controversial figure in African-American activism, Saniyah is an unapologetic and tireless activist in her own right. Therefore, when she began to elaborate on why she was rechristened with this new name, the connection became clear.

They call me The Activist. It shows up every day. When I am advocating for my teachers to get better resources, I am an activist. When I am demanding that teachers provide quality educational experiences for my students, I am an activist. When I am fighting for black boys to remain in regular educational classes, and not carelessly put into special education, I am serving as an activist. When I am preaching the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy, I am an activist. When I make sure teachers and administration understand the importance of addressing and attending to the whole child, I am an activist.

Activism means fighting the good fight. It means that children have the right to a quality education that includes being in a safe and nurturing environment, being taught, not just academic standards, but also life skills.

**Overcoming stereotypes: Saniyah.** Although she has had to go to battle for the rights of others, she has also had to do the same for herself. She explained that, even though she does not walk into a situation focused on her Blackness, there are rarely times where others do not make her aware of it.

I always try to show up and interact with others understanding that we are all human. I really try hard to demonstrate this awareness. I think when I become aware that other people's opinions of me are judgmental—good or bad—is when... Okay, for clarity, when I come into a space, specifically in educational situations, I come in not thinking of my skin color or me being a young woman. I come in open-hearted, most of the time. I am hoping we can connect human to human—a person talking to another person about children. I walk in like, “Hey I am Saniyah! I am here!” I am just me. I come in as another human being expressing myself hoping to experience love, joy, and peace with everyone I am going to meet, greet, and interact with that day. Yet, other people's perceptions of me, their actions, and their behaviors make me take a step back and say, “Okay, Saniyah, don't forget that you are a young Black woman walking into this space.” Then my eyes are opened.

I am very aware of the impact being a young black woman with darker skin and natural hair has had on my life. Despite what the world says about the beauty of black women, I have found this to be one of the biggest issues I have had to face in my interactions with men, and ironically white men. When I am meeting with white men, I get this strength in me that must come from my ancestors because I know I am coming to prove the world wrong. I am like, “Yes, you are about to experience all this greatness!” I know that they don’t expect me to be as knowledgeable, articulate, or to be able to effectively communicate as well as I do. However, my power usually gets me what I want at least ninety-nine percent of the time. It manifest in two ways either they want to befriend me or they are intimidated.

The intimidation usually shows up as hateful or in the form of excessive use of research or language. You know, word choice. So, I try to come in a situation well-prepared. I make sure I know everything there is to know about what we are talking about.

Then there is the whole Jezebel stereotype in regards to the relationship between white men and black women. In the majority of the interactions I have with white men, they always have to comment on some aspect of my physical appearance, particularly my skin. What I have found is that white men, particularly older white men, love dark skin women. I do know that. It is like a secret that everyone knows, but doesn’t talk about. At times it makes me feel very uncomfortable. I can only imagine what it must have been like to be an enslaved woman. The thought has made me cry numerous of times when I think about slave women having their beauty objectified and taken advantage of—being molested, raped, and over-sexed—not having any consent over your own body.

Instead of ignoring stereotypes, the activist and teacher in her uses these experiences to educate or enlighten people. Additionally, she has learned to find and embrace the power that ironically manifest from these labels or misconceptions.

**A mentor is a must: Cathy.** Her journey to become an educational administrator was fast; however, her former principal ignited the spark. He saw her potential and encouraged her to pursue a career where she could make the biggest difference.

I was encouraged, at that time by my principal, to go into leadership because when I began as a first grade teacher there, I took on extracurricular activities and leadership positions. He thought I had leadership potential. I had decided to go ahead and get my masters and he actually asked me what I was going to major in and I told him probably curriculum. What he told me, I will never forget and I tell others the same. He said, “Cathy, you are an excellent teacher and getting a masters in curriculum you aren’t going to learn anything more than you already

know or will learn through experience. So, if you want to do something different and more impactful in the field of education, and I see you being an upwardly mobile person, I would recommend and encourage you to go into administration.” I did, in fact, take his advice and he even recommended I apply to a new program at the university with a focus on administration.

Just as someone was there to point her in a bigger and brighter direction, Cathy did the same for others. After ascending the professional ladder within her district, she decided to help others—particularly minorities—who desired to following in her footsteps.

When I became a principal, it just so happened I did have a mentor. It was a white male. He saw my leadership potential. As a twenty-year-old teacher, I was taking over the school. I started mentoring, because you do have to have someone mentoring you. So, I created a program for African Americans interested in going into administration for the district. You know at that time it was just so few of us. It was only like maybe fourteen percent. I would get them together and I would do mock interviews and get them prepared for the written exams. I would work with their writing and help put their applications together. That became very popular. Before, you knew it we had a whole network. We were mentoring and working with African Americans because there was a need to get more of us in decision making roles within the district.

**Activism: Cathy.** Having grown up during the Civil Rights Movement, Cathy has had vast experiences as an activist. Some of those experiences were more traditional forms of activism, such as sit-ins and picketing. However, according to the literature, African-American women have historically had to enact other, more clever forms of activism. This was the case for Cathy, when she took on the principalship of the worst elementary school in her school district.

I had already turned around XYZ Elementary. The superintendent called me and said, “Cathy, I want you to go to another school. You have been at XYZ for seven years.” I said, “Okay, which school?” He told me, “Utopia Elementary.” Now, everybody knew this school wasn’t a utopia, so don’t let the name fool you. He said to me, “You know I really believe you can make a difference at this school. So, I said, “Okay, I’ll go.”

On my first visit there I took a tour of the school with the custodian. The facility was horrible. I mean they had broken windows. The paint was coming off of the

walls. There were no bathroom doors on the stalls. I was appalled when I went to the school. I mean, when the kids went to the restroom they couldn't close the stalls. The tiles were coming off of the floor. When you walked down the hallway some of the light bulbs were out. The ceilings were so high. I was pointing out all of the things that needed to be done to the custodian.

I was like, "The ceilings need to be lowered. The floors need to be fixed." I think he thought I was out of my mind. He quit not too long after that. However, at the same time I made calls to the person over facilities for the district. I introduced myself.

I said, "Hey Mr. J\_, this is Cathy over at Utopia Elementary School. This school needs a lot of work." I started running off all the things I wanted done. He pretty much said, you must be losing your mind. I also told him I had this in a memorandum. I don't think we had computers then, so I was giving him a heads up.

He said, "Well you know, Utopia. We are looking at selling this school and we don't want to put a lot of work into it. It is one of the buildings we are going to get rid of. I think the university may be interested in buying it."

I said, "When are you doing it?"

"It will probably take about three, four, or five years."

"Are you serious?" I said, "Look, do you know how many kids are going to come through this school in three to five years? Even now? They deserve better than this, Larry. I am not taking no for an answer. This is going to be my new campaign. I don't want to be there with the building looking like that. I know parents don't and neither the kids." I got so mad.

He copped an attitude. "You know what, it is not being done and that is the bottom line."

The next day, and this is written up in a book, but that's another story. The deputy superintendent or the superintendent sent a memo saying that they were going to start having school board meetings in schools once a month so they can come out to the community. So, they said if you wanted to have a board meeting at your school... You know where I am going with this... then send me a memo. I called him and said, "Dr. S\_, this is Cathy, and I would like to have a school board meeting at Utopia Elementary School."

He said, "No problem. Cathy, you are the first one to call."

"Great, I just went through my mail and I just saw your memo and I want to have a meeting."

“The first one is in August.”

I said, “No, can we have ours in the spring?”

He said, “Yeah, sure.”

Then I said, “Can you do me a favor? Can you send me a memo confirming we are going to have it on March 20th with all the board members and can you cc LJ? So, when I got my memo I knew LJ had gotten his. I called him back! I said, “Mr. J\_, this is Cathy again. I don’t know if you received a memorandum from Dr. S?”

He said, “I received it.”

I said, “Okay, great! I am having this school board meeting and I am going to take school board members, parents, and everybody on a tour of this school. I am going to show them the paint that’s coming off of the walls. I am going to show them the broken windows. I am going to show them that little boys and girls don’t have doors on the bathroom stalls. I am going to show them the graffiti. I am going to show them everything. I am going to take them into classrooms and show them how the bulletin boards are falling down. I am going to show them the entire building. Now, they will either see that—and you are going to get credit for it—or you are going to come in and do all of the things I have requested to be done because I know there is money in the budget to do those things. You have money in your budget to renovate each schools. I don’t care if you are going to sell it in a year, but for this year kids don’t need to be in a building like this. Now, when they come, if they see a beautiful facility I am going to give you all the credit for it. I am going to say, ‘LJ came in and made this a place where kids would want to be.’ But, if you don’t do it, I am going to pull out my memo and show them that I tried to make this a place where students, parents, and teachers would love to come to everyday, but you denied them this opportunity.

The next day I had workers doing everything I asked them to do. Now, that was truly a defining moment. This was a school that went from eighty-eight to number three in four years. What it said to parents, kids, teachers, and to everyone is that our kids mattered and that was before they even walked into the building. To see all those workers there making changes for them.

**Overcoming stereotypes: Cathy.** When listening to Cathy speak about her experience with racism and discrimination, the principal researcher felt it were just a footnote in her life trajectory. Her confidence allowed her to make light of those things or individuals who tried to serve as obstacles in her life. Therefore, being Black, a woman, and young did not stop her; it only empowered her.

As I mentioned, I grew up during the Civil Rights Movement. We picketed. We participated in sit-ins at Woolworth. Growing up in the South, I was definitely discriminated against. Our schools were segregated, which was great because I got a really good education. Our books were hand-me-downs. I never got a new book. In some respects I think desegregation was the worst thing to happen to our children. I attended this conference over twenty-five years ago. He talked about how we never really integrated the schools we just desegregated them, because when you integrate you work together. You accept people. That never happened. Prior to integration, we were taught by people who cared and wanted to teach us. When integration started, you had people lying in the streets to keep the buses from bringing the black children in.

I can speak for my city. When we started integrating schools it was like we were forcing ourselves on people who did not want us there. We had teachers who absolutely did not want to teach us as opposed to when schools were segregated and the teachers loved us. They involved our parents and participated in the community. They worked hard. It was truly a village, but during the early days of integration that was not the case. As a matter of fact, even today you have people who don't care about the students they teach.

However, despite all of this, my parents were wonderful role models that taught we were just as good, if not better than anyone else. So, I grew up knowing I could do and be anything I wanted to be. Now, because of this, I believed in the rights of all people and just being fair.

But, I am also aware of incredible amounts of discrimination that goes on today. The racism and hatred is still there to a large degree. So, that's how I view the world. However, because of my past, I never allowed my race or the fact that I was a female, interfere or stop me from being what I knew I could be or stop what I needed to get done. So, I didn't let what people may think about me ... In other words I have a high degree... I mean my self-esteem is off the charts. Always has been. I feel really good about who I am. I am highly competent. I had an incredible reputation. I was seen as a highly intelligent, forceful, dynamic woman.

I created an image for myself. I don't know if I did this because I was black woman, but I really believed... well I know I was smarter than many of my colleagues. I think it has to do with my upbringing. I was never afraid of going for the top positions. As I already told you, I was the first female and African-American president of our State Association of School Administrators for four years. I was the first grad assistant at the state's top university. I ran the best schools. I guess, being a black female... well, I see it as a plus. I am very proud of being a black female. I have been able to achieve every goal I get for myself.

**A mentor is a must: Reba.** Like the other participants, Reba spoke of her role as a mentor and the various individuals she has been able to help—particularly through her

role as an educational coach. However, where her story differed was in regard to having mentors. Unlike the other participants, she spoke of how she had to navigate the educational waters without the assistance of consistent and wiser counsel. In her words, her mentor was “God”.

I did not have a person. The Holy Spirit was my mentor. If, from the beginning, I had someone who was really pushing me, I am sure I would have been a much more successful student than I was. I think I have always been starved for that. The kind of one-on-one attention I needed, I didn't get because my parents couldn't give it to me. It was a lot of us. If I had it, I would have gone further, faster.

I had someone who encouraged me, but I did not have ongoing dialogue where someone is constantly pushing you to go further in what you do and to go deeper in your reflection in what you have done. This person, she saw what I didn't see in myself. She helped me chart out a path, but when I had leadership challenges in my residency, I didn't call her. However, this had to be one of the most important relationships in my career. She literally did everything in her power to help draw the potential she saw in me out.

But, I am not behind. The Lord is redeeming me. What I am doing is being done and has been at such a rapid pace. When I became a principal at twenty-eight I was afraid, like what am I going to do know? To be able to say I have had all these experiences at thirty-seven with just fifteen years in the game is ridiculous. That to me is what happens when you say, “God I am going to roll with your plan.” Clearly, I didn't plan any of this.

**Activism: Reba.** Just as her experience in education has been unexpected, the area in education to which she decided to give particular focus was also unexpected. According to Reba and much of the research, the educational experience of African-American boys differs greatly in comparison to others. This became incredibly apparent to Reba early in her career.

I remember the day that I became painfully aware of how people look at black boys in schools. I literally went home and cried. I was a sixth grade teacher at the time. My grade level partner was a white woman. We were teaching on the West Side of Chicago. It was a typical Title One school. It was 6-12. We had recess time for the 6th grade. It took place in a gym across the street. It was unstructured. The boys would play ball. The girls would sit on the side and do hair and talk. It came a time we needed to talk to them about how to have productive playtime.

We decided we needed to have a talk with them by splitting them according to gender. When it came time for us to decide who was going to talk to which group, I remember my grade level partner jumped up and said, “I am not going to talk to all those boys by myself.” I said, “Why not?” What she said, hurt my heart. In essence, she was afraid. She did not feel safe speaking to a room of 6th grade black boys by herself.

I love my students like they are my kids. Until that moment, I did not know that people felt differently about the black boys they teach. Do you not know that whatever you feel in your heart about the students you teach you are communicating that whether you say it or not. From that moment on I took a major role in advocating for black boys. I would research things that they needed. Like, boys need to get up and move around if they are going to be in one setting for long periods of time. Before this, I actually did it instinctively. I did not realize there was a body of research that supported it.

So, then I decided I needed to be responsible and take this thing on. I was going to make a difference in that area. Together, I got the teachers and we read and talked in order to find out what they needed. Some of us designed training for our colleagues to help give them what they needed in order to feel comfortable with the children so they were able to meet the kids’ needs. They did not realize they were repressing the openness to learn.

I also, set up weekly checks with my boys who were having trouble. I was telling parents what they needed to do and what I would do to support. “You need yellow folder for this, a blue one for that...Check their bags every day.” The Book Bag Check was another initiative. We had them to dump everything out of their bags. They learned to sort, purge, organized. It increased their homework submission rate because they weren’t losing stuff so much.

When I became a resident principal my heart was still with the male learners. I chose to start a male mentoring program. I ran it that year. It was a success, so much so that when I left the male staff members decided to keep it going. The students asked for it. I didn’t even know that this happened until they called me and invited me to a banquet, recognizing my role in starting, Men Building Men. I was shocked. At the time, I wasn’t thinking about longevity.

It was a text-based organization. We did a survey to see what was on the minds of our young men. Based on the results we chose the chapters we were going to focus on. The male staff would lead. Then men from all walks of the community would come and be there just to support and connect with the young men. After the session they would tell stories, etc... I would be there when they started and then I would leave before it began. I wanted the boys to feel safe to just talk. Afterwards, they would have open gym time to just eat and play ball. Non-structured time that involved the physical release that they need. They would end up talking about deep stuff on the basketball court. This would happen every other week.

One day, while we are serving breakfast in walks the roughest and toughest kid in the school simply because he wanted the book. I was shocked. In one year we increased the male reading proficiency by 12 points.

**Overcoming stereotypes: Reba.** There are many lenses Reba revealed through which she viewed the world being a woman of color, a mother, a single mother, a working mother, and a Christian. However, the times in her life where she was most painfully aware of her gender were when she served under Black male leadership.

I am hyper aware of gender when I interact with black men. The lens of being a woman and a Black women really is prevalent in these situations. Black male leaders are far more likely to acknowledge gender and entertain it in an overt way. They are not the same, of course, but the ones I have experienced have been flirtatious and would assume I would take on the wife role. It is like I am supposed to be the barer and bather in the movie, "Coming to America". This for me feels real slimy and nasty.

I have continuously had to deal with black male ego. It's like many of them are subconsciously saying, "I am going to be the pimp. These my hoes." I have found that a lot of them needed to feel needed and if not, they won't help at all. This is sad because historically, we have always had to work together to ensure any kind of advancement within the race.

Another area that was a source of conflict for Reba related to the title of and connotations behind being a single mother of color.

I fight like hell to maintain balance between my work, my leadership responsibilities, and my home. I have made significant changes on the production or pace of productivity in life my professional life. It has slowed down and in some cases stopped altogether. As a result, I have more compassion for those who work and are parents (the people who I serve). For me, it tempers my instinct to say yes to everything work wise.

Plus, I battle with identifying as a single mother because of the negative connotations associated with it, like your child is deficient, your home is deficient, etc... My son is complete. He is a rock star. The fact that I am unmarried has not impacted him in a negative way. However, sometimes, I identify with it when reality sets in like, I got to go get him because I ain't got nobody else. I make better moment to moment decisions, because I am trying to ensure my son's life is whole and vibrant and that my work life doesn't impede on his life.

The few times I really felt the stigma of being a single mother was while having

parenting discussions in the work place. Most times my co-workers would talk about decisions being made by them and their spouses. “My wife this” or “My husband and I decided that...” It was during these times when it really hit home that it was just me. I don’t think they intentionally tried to make me feel bad or anything, but they were just not cognizant that it could.

**A mentor is a must: Aniyah.** The review of the literature on womanism presented findings on the importance of the motherline and motherwit in the lives of African-American women. These phenomena were heard frequently during the interview with Aniyah. Aniyah’s mother, who died when Aniyah was a senior in high school, created a foundation that has guided her throughout her life. She was quick to tell the principal researcher that although she has had a plethora of mentors, the relationship with her mother trumped them all in more ways than one.

She broke things down so that I understood why we were doing things. She taught math from a moral standpoint. Everything was tied to something. Because of that, I always give a rational for something. If you did not do something right the first time, my mother would make you do it again. When I got into the classroom, if I didn’t know the best teaching practices, I knew mama and grandma practices.

Every day, as far back as I can remember she would always say, “Early to bed, early to rise...” Even if it was a weekend we had to wake up early. We only had two hours of free time on the weekend. She always said, “Business owners get up at the crack of dawn.”

Another saying she used was the scripture, “In all you getting, get understanding,” or “People are innocent until proven guilty.” Her wisdom helped me when dealing with children. I don’t jump to conclusions without getting as much information as I can, in all situations. The scripture, “The race is not given to the swift nor to the strong but the one who endures,” helped me understand and appreciate, strategy.

I often recall the way she prepared me for her passing. Her wit prepared me. She pulled me into the room and said, “I want you to know I am a parent. Par means partial or a piece of. Rent means, temporary. So, put those together—partial rent. I will never be yours. The only thing you can do is to borrow me and then return me to the owner the way you found me.”

I wanted to be angry, but I got it. I spent the rest of her life ensuring that she would always be better than when she arrived. Life is about what you do with the gifts you have for the short time you are here.

Although Aniyah credits much of who she is to the wisdom passed to her by her mother, she was also quick to note the guidance she received from a plethora of women in her life, particularly her grandmother and other educators. She said that these women lifted her during tough times. They cared, but what they weren't able to offer was exposure. She got the love, but she could not see too far past her circumstances because she wasn't exposed. However, there was one individual she credits for exposing her to a new way of approaching her professional endeavors.

I was paired with a successful site director. She was a White female, but we came together on the strength that we were women in an area of education dominated by a lot of men. She taught me what being successful in this position looked like. This lady taught me to negotiate my salary and everything she did was intentional. She would ask me things like, "What do you think goes into a successful recruitment? You know it was successful when you see what? What is your contract goal? If you recruit 213, you need at least 140 to enter, so on day one how many do you need to show up?" She took me through word problems or made me think backwards.

That is when it clicked. Be intentional about everything you do in life. All it took was that one time and something just clicked.

**Activism: Aniyah.** Much of Aniyah's background influenced her activism. She desired to help children see beyond their immediate present. This was the foundation for all she did. Whether it was through the mothering she displayed in the classroom that enabled her to garner trust from her students and their parents, or through the training of hundreds of educators who will eventually impact thousands of students, she pushed this agenda. Having had a taste of how educational policy works, and understanding that this was where more systematic change occurs, she plans to continue to spread her activism in this area.

Because God is the author of my life, I have to do what I am led and called to do. I am called to be in a position where I can make real change for kids. I want to have an influence the laws that govern those in charge of making decisions for children. I am tired of playing games with people when it comes to kids. I am

tired of coaching a teacher and honestly, that is really not where the change comes from. It cannot be because all teachers are bad. I am tired of playing with grown folks but I have to crawl before I walk.

**Overcoming stereotypes: Aniyah.** Like most of the participants, Aniyah is fully aware of the common stereotypes about Black people in general, and women more specifically. As a result, she works to dispel those misconceptions while remaining true to herself. Ironically, despite the assumptions people have created about her based on labels, she has also experienced the empowering effect of being her authentic self.

Because of my profession and the circles I am in, I have found myself researching common biases and stereotypes out there about Blacks and Black women. It shapes the intentionality behind the interactions I have with people of different races and genders. I want to know what other people are thinking, either first-hand or written, so I can try and break those stereotypes. I try to find commonalities to help normalize situations. You get torn between trying to stay true to who you are versus trying to think of a conversation in order to make people feel comfortable around you.

I am reading this book and the author, who is a Black man talks about this. He would whistle a tune familiar to the group of individuals he was around so they would not feel threatened and grab their purse or what have you.

I have done similar things so many times. I was so glad when I read the book because wasn't sure what it was called or that there was a name to it. At times it gets difficult because you ask yourself, "Why do I have to accommodate another race or culture so they don't feel uncomfortable around me?" My mom always, taught me that we are not inadequate and you never diminish your light to make others feel good about themselves. However, at the same time when you are in certain settings you have to think about the controllable factors. You can't control other people's life experiences or viewpoints. The best you can do is to do something contrary to what they were taught to believe.

It is a fine line between staying true to who you are and trying to dispel myths. I think there is always a time and place for this and it is important to maintain balance between doing what you can to normalize a situation and being your authentic self.

To be honest, though, my Blackness has worked for me and against me in the world of education. I love it when you have non-African-Americans and they have all these theories and these great hypotheses about what might be wrong with kids and then I go in and provide the correct information. I am able to say what I need to say, while speaking the language of the common man.

### **Discussion of Participants' Narrative Data**

In summation, three main themes emerged in regard to the perceived role that womanist characteristics have in the professional practices and leadership styles of African-American female educational leaders: mentorship, activism, and stereotypes. According to the literature, mentorship found in circles of network and activism played a critical role in the lives of African-American women. These roles prepared them for the harsh realities of racism, helped them navigate politics within their professional lives, and served as a place of refuge. Therefore, it not surprising that the idea of mentorship was important to all of the participants, whether it was having a mentor or being a mentor. This type of relationship was cited by participants as a critical component of successful leadership and professional practices. As one participant pointed out, having a mentor was not a requirement but it definitely played an important role in helping a person navigate the terrain of their professional life.

The second area of importance for the participants was the role of activism within their professional lives. As the literature on womanism and activism revealed, Black women have had their own unique way historically of acting on behalf of others. Consequently, each participant in the study revealed they had found a way to embed activism within their vocation. Their activism manifested in the fight for the rights of children, teachers, parents, and sometimes themselves.

The third are of important, stereotypes, have forced each woman to take a stand for herself. Every participant was always aware of the misconceptions that accompany women of color, but each one has fought hard to diminish them and create of new image of what it means to be a Black woman. For many of the participants, because of the professional circles in which they find themselves, it seems as if there were a

subconscious understanding that they carry their communities on their shoulders.

### **Narrative Summary of Findings for Research Question 3**

What elements of womanism influence the African-American female educational leaders' efforts to close the achievement gap experienced by many African-American students? During the interview each participant spoke about her experience with the direct or indirect impact of the elements of womanism on student achievement, primarily as it pertained to students in urban areas. The themes that emerged for Research Question 3 were: teacher leadership, care, and high expectations.

**Teacher leadership: Saniyah.** Like the other participants, Saniyah stood out as a classroom teacher and took on many leadership roles during that time.

By the second semester of my second year teaching, I was named 5th grade team leader. I was in the directory of exemplary teachers, the tuning protocol training conductor, which focused on the examination of student work. I started peer-to-peer classroom walkthroughs before it was required by administration. The principal put me through every possible training available for teachers in the county.

**Care: Saniyah.** As a principal, when Saniyah conducted interviews, if she did not hear the candidate say something about caring for children (without being prompted) they did not get the job, even if their education was obtained from a prestigious university.

You cannot be successful with a kid if you don't care. Kids have to know you care. They have to see it and hear it. You have to model it because it has to be visible. There is this thing I call "care language." It is all about restorative conversations. It's about purpose over power.

For teachers, I exhibit care by always being available. I am trying to work on that a bit more. I am sometimes too accessible. But, I show compassion, engage in positive coaching while holding space for their frustrations. I try to know what is going on in their lives, personally and professionally, so that I can advocate for them. I can work to make them feel safe. I believe in taking care of the whole person with everyone I come into contact with, teachers, students, administrators, stakeholder, etc...

But, teachers feel successful when they are in an environment where they feel the

spirit of care in the air. They are less stressed. They know they can reach out for help if they need to. All in all, the entire place becomes a happier place to be because people care.

Also, when teachers are cared for, they care for the students. I instill in educators, whether male or female, the importance of building nurturing relationships. I encourage them to help their students find their gifts in order to be the best version of themselves. I ask them to see success in each child. I'll say, "Do you see the CEO in that kid?" When an educator cares, he or she can help that child recognize their gifts and treat them as such. Call them what they are, speak into their lives, and help them believe in their dreams.

**High expectations: Saniyah.** When Saniyah took on her first principalship, she had no idea her job would be to clean house. However, it did not take long for her to realize what needed to be done. She had to get rid of those who did not believe in giving students the best and replacing them with teachers who did.

My kids would be heard singing, "Dunt, dunt, dunt, another bites the dust," or "Another one down!" They would say this when it became evident that another teacher either left or was asked to leave. However, when a teacher left or was asked to leave it was because they were doing a disservice to the children. What I didn't realize, however, was that I needed an effective teacher already in place before I fired one. Either way, after a while, people would walk in and say, shockingly, "Wow, it is so peaceful in here!"

What I know is that I go in with the intent to transform. I go in to set systems right. I take the bullshit out. I don't go in telling people what to do. I believe in building a team, even the antagonistic individuals—because quiet as kept a lot of times they have good points. I just require that my staff is made up of qualified individuals who are willing to go above and beyond for kids. I really do believe that I go in and transform systems into being the best that they can be because I believe in humanity.

**Teacher leadership: Cathy.** Although Cathy's matriculation out of the classroom happened fast, while in the classroom she thrived as a teacher leader.

When I began as a first grade teacher there, I took on extracurricular activities and added responsibilities. I was the first grade chair person. I headed up the sunshine committee and several other committees in the school. I really ran that school. I was doing a bit of everything.

**Care: Cathy.** Listening to Cathy, it was evident to the principal researcher that

the ethic of care was the foundation for her life's work. Like other women of color within the field of education, the drive for student success was in hopes that the young people would have better opportunities and were able to face the world well-equipped.

I care deeply about kids, all kids, but particularly African-American kids. I spend a bulk of my time working in schools that are under served. So, that means I spend a lot of time working in schools of poverty in urban cities. I do that because as much as I travel and go around and see what is happening. They don't have the best teachers, right. Often times the schools that need the best teachers get the ones that are not best prepared...I want every kid to get a quality education, every single one. We have so many kids come to us with many challenges and it is because many of our kids come from poverty and many come from dysfunctional households. That is just a fact. But it doesn't mean these kids can't reach great success. It doesn't mean they cannot do well in school. It means that as a teacher, because this kid is being sexually abused at home, or physically abused and emotionally abused, and is not been fed, or has worn the same clothes every single day for two weeks because his mother is a drug addict, or is being raised by his mother or great-grandmother who have five or six kids. I am telling you, I mean those are their struggles. I think they deserve a quality education. They come to school every day. They deserve teachers who really care about them and are not going to get angry because the kids are angry. Many of these kids are angry. They don't have a repertoire. They have not been taught how to respond in certain situations because they did not have the upbringing. So, they come from angry households and their response is they are angry. They are like, "I am going to cuss you out because I am mad" and teachers don't know how to respond to them so they kick them out.

That is a lack of caring on the part of teachers when they do that stuff and it drives me insane. When I ran my own schools I doubt I suspended five kids in thirty-five years. But, now I do believe in teaching strategies to teachers to avoid this behavior. Our kids can't afford to be sent out of the classroom. I talk with them about having empathy. I tell them don't take the ill behavior personally. You know, the rolling of the eyes and stuff.

It's the real passion I have for kids to have academic success so they can have a shot at a good future. I try to preach this message as I do this work across the county.

**High expectations: Cathy.** Taking over and turning around two underachieving schools was a very big task. However, according to Cathy,

I had a vision. I wanted my school to be the very best. I said, I want these poor children to receive the same education as the private school kids. I just needed to right teachers. So, I was going to hire the very best and if they did not have the

skills I am going to make sure they get the skills because I can train them.

This was my vision, right. And I brought it to reality. I believe in being a visionary. If you are in the field of education and if you are a visionary, you have to know the type of school you want and what you want for the scholars in your building. I created schools that...if I had an opening for one position I would have two hundred applicants. You know everybody wanted to work at my school because they were highly organized, structured, kids were extremely well-behaved, and the kids were performing at very high levels. So, but that was my vision and I believed our kids deserved that. I think that that is truly important. I am all about the kids.

I had to deal with my union time and time again, but I knew the contract. I knew what I could and could not do. I studied the contract, so when I said to a teacher, I want your lesson plans on your desk, because I don't want to interrupt you since I know you are going to be engaged with students when I walk in the classroom. And I was in classrooms every single day. So, you didn't see teachers sitting. If they were sitting they were working with students. That was expectation. The union tried to say I could make teachers have lesson plans on their desk. That was a grievance I got one time. The contract said they must have lesson plans, but they were mad about having to place them on the teacher's desk. I said, go head and grieve that. Eventually, it got to a point where they just left me alone.

In order to make her vision come to fruition, she knew she had to quell the discipline issue at one of her schools. She had never desired to be a principal of discipline. In her opinion, this title was useless because of the plethora of ways discipline can be managed in a school. In order to prove this, as a new school principal, she set out to find a solution to the incessant discipline problems facing her school. Her research introduced her to a new method of approaching the topic. She learned it and she trained her staff. By the next year, the numbers of students coming through her office diminished significantly.

I remember getting this pamphlet in the mail about Assertive Discipline. The originator was going to be the key speaker for the National Association for School Principals. I read what the program was about and I knew I had to go. I was going to this because at this time people did not have classroom management plans. At the end of the presentation I knew I needed to implement this plan at my school and every teacher was going to use it. He had a booth because he was selling the program. He had a training manual and you could rent a film for two weeks. They sent it to me and I got back to my staff. I told them we were going to use it. They were excited, but I told them I have to learn to use it first.

So, I read it over the summer and when teachers reported, I trained them. They had their management plan and expectations and it worked. The second year as a principal, the first nine week I saw eleven kids in my office. The next week I saw maybe seven. The whole year, I saw maybe 20 kids in my office. Isn't that amazing? You see, but teachers actually knew what do to and that was significant in my career as a principal. I no longer in my office and just dealing with discipline, but I could get into the classroom observe and give feedback. I was able to be the instructional leader I wanted to be. That was a defining moment. Well, I would call it a defining time—time.

**Teacher leadership: Reba.** Considering education was not Reba's first choice, the joy she experienced in the classroom came as a surprise to her. It was during this time that she got "hooked" and knew instantly that this was the career path she wanted to take. As a result, she and her students began to thrive under her leadership. She eventually went on to serve as a teacher leader within her school.

My initial assignment was third grade and when that person grade came back I taught fifth and sixth grade language arts. It was my first experience teaching a grade that was tested and the scores improved. They went up by like twenty percentage points. I also coached cheerleading. I began to really get integrated in the school family. However, the next year I moved on to another charter school. It was like arriving to Mecca. The people were so smart and straight up learners and ridiculously reflective. This is when I figured out how much I loved middle school. This is where I cut my teeth as a teacher and figured out who I was as an educator. I taught math, science, and a targeted reading class. I really spread my wings at this school. I led professional development and summer school. I also became the internal voice on how to best educate our black male students.

**Care: Reba.** For many women of color in the field of education, the ethic of care is exhibited through the desire to prepare children for whatever it is they may face upon leaving the schoolhouse. This philosophy paralleled the way Reba described the role that care played in her leadership style.

The best preparation is the preparation that most resembles what you are preparing for. If I am a doctor, I do a residency. It is all preparatory, but real. If I am a child of color, I need simulated exercises that help me understand what that means. The care looks different because life looks different. So, I always ask myself, what can I do now so this young person is prepared to go into the world he is getting ready to face?

As a leader it is the same thing. If I know what you are going to experience, because I have been there and in those circles, then I have to ensure that you know how to respond and I have to have the conversation to see where you can actually expand. Instead of just talking, I may create an experience similar to what you will face in educational leadership. People must have those real life experiences. Therefore, you have to listen to what they desire and apply whatever pressure, praise, encouragement, and practice that they need to go where they need to go. It really is the same with children. Kids know where they want to go. They set goals and have dreams. They know their areas of weakness. An object at rest will stay at rest until acted on by outside forces. There has to be a demand placed on potential if it is ever going to come into motion.

If you look up potential energy (stored energy an object contains) and kinetic energy (energy of an object in motion) something has to happen. I have to help develop muscle memory and the best way to pull out potential is to put demand on it. No motion until potential energy is connected to kinetic energy. That's how I show I care. I help people reach their highest potential.

**High expectations: Reba.** During the interviews, Reba provided very fun but poignant analogies when elaborating on concepts. She gave equally fun but poignant analogies when she discussed the role high expectations played in her professional life. Like most of the other participants, her expectations were there because of the vision she had for the young people who would be impacted by the leadership and instruction she provided to those who would be their teachers.

It is sort of like the guiding force right behind what I do. The degree to which my dream comes to fruition is the expectations behind it. A cake can be just a cake, but a cake with fresh ingredients, or decorated by a top notch artist, or given just a bit of love becomes more than just a cake. It becomes a culinary masterpiece because it is composed of the best elements and created with love by gifted hands. I bring this to my work because I just feel like it is the right thing to do. It is the way you honor and respect others by giving them the very best of you and by doing what you can as a leader to bring out the best in others and helping them stay there. It impacts everything. It determines my levels of focus and intensity. It impacts my pace and commitment to myself and those I serve as a leader and the way I hold them accountable for what they want for themselves.

It is like blood. It feeds the organs so that they can work at their optimum level. If the circulatory system is compromised the body falls apart. It is the life force for any goal or any mission. Kids did not ask to be here so they deserve the very best experience here on earth. Even with adults, none of us ask to be here so let's give ourselves the very best.

**Teacher leadership: Aniyah.** Aniyah and her students thrived in the classroom, so much so that she was invited many of times to show the world a glimpse of the excitement that filled her classroom. She recalled the day she took the stage with her class and they performed a few of the rap songs they used in class to help facilitate instruction. She remembered being so nervous because she did not want to embarrass the school. However, what she was doing encouraged the students, maintained their excitement, was relevant to them, and aided in the mastering of concepts. Aniyah related the following anecdote:

...three years later, I got a call from the same group who I presented to, inviting me on an all-expense paid weekend to see Oprah. When I asked why I was selected. They said I was a teacher whose impact was felt beyond my time with the students.

Despite the fact that becoming an educator was not Aniyah's lifelong dream, it did not make her influence any less impactful. As a result, others took notice of Aniyah's influence on the progress of her students. It was appreciated by the principal, assistant principal, parents, and students.

Education was always something in the back of my mind to do. Nothing that I was that pressed to do. I didn't grow up talking to my dolls or anything. It was no lifelong dream to be a teacher. I just thought it was cool because, again, I loved children and I always wanted to instill some things in children I felt I could have benefitted from as a child. At any rate, I went into education and did not know what the heck I was doing, but I did it and went on to be a great educator. So, I guess my parents liked me enough so that after my first year of teaching they signed a petition and asked that I loop up from third to fourth grade with all twenty plus students. So, I did because again I didn't know much about what that meant but I figured if they wanted me I would follow kids up and so we had another great year. I am still good friends with my principal. Still very good friends with my first assistant principal.

Yep, that was my first years teaching. I was asked to present at the district leadership conference. From there I was recruited or asked to serve as a staff development coordinator for the district while I still taught. Again none of these things were things I was looking for. I guess people saw things in me I most definitely did not see in myself. So, I went on to do that and from there I was

asked to go ahead and work in education reform.

**Care: Aniyah.** As the principal researched listened to Aniyah discuss the importance of the role of care in regard to her profession, it was evident that it served as a foundational element. For her, it was not just desired, but required.

When see and hear care, I tell you what, I think of life support. I think of unconditional. I think of ongoing. It's a cyclical—it doesn't stop. There is a lot of social and emotional wisdom involved with caring. It is doing the right thing consistently.

When I think of care, I think about G- Hospital. I think about the person that comes in and has been shot or in a car wreck and they go into the trauma unit. I think about those nurses, or first the people who pass off that person to the nurses. Then the nurses moving to prepare the patient for surgery. The doctors.... The machines needed to keep that person alive. The highs and lows (when the heart beat goes and comes). It is life and death. You don't quit when you care. You keep striving for excellence.

I think of the nurses that cared for my mother until her death, or my teachers—Dr. H., Lauren H-, and Mrs. G-. Being around them felt so right. It made you want to please. These women were brilliant and they did not back down. Their goal was to create productive citizens. They all have confidence in themselves, children, and the profession. They were compassionate.

I started going through some real tough things in fourth grade. I tested out of my grade and I start a new school. However, we couldn't afford the new private school and I went to public school. At that point, my stepfather started beating my mother. He was abusive because things were not going well in his life. The school was large and it was easier to get lost but these Black women did not let us get lost or get away with anything. If they got on you it was because you were disrupting learning and they wanted you to be the best. I remember Mrs. G- saying to us, "Y'all standing at the door like a bunch of hot tail heifers." We saw that as care, because it sounded like our grandmothers. She spoke our language. They knew the language we responded to because she understood how our parents spoke to us.

Then there was Mrs. A-. I had a break down. I fell to the ground near the front office. I remember Mrs. A- saying, "You better rise from there like Lazarus rose from the dead." These are examples of the care I had and try to pass on. It was life sustaining care. Care that kept me going.

However, care is the entry point to any situation. You have some minorities in the classrooms that think caring is enough and it isn't. "You can't get people to Harvard on heels of relationship." Sometimes, non-minorities miss the point. It is

not the end all. It is the entry point to rigor or anything that is hard. There is something to be said about taking the element of stress out of a hard situation. If you are trying to buy a home or a car, the salesmen know the relationship they build with the customer is eighty percent of the sale. It knocks the edge off of things. It's like drinking a cocktail. However, you have to find a balance. This is where America is doing a disservice to black children. School leaders should make the shift from being disciplinarians to facilitators of learning by using relationships as an entry point.

**High expectations: Aniyah.** The expectations Aniyah had for educational leadership, and her role as a leadership in particular, came from past experiences. She took what she saw, the things she appreciated, and those she did not, to determine the expectations she had for herself and for others. Her expectations were all-inclusive. She believed that an effective leader isn't just effective in one area but in many.

With educational leaders I always see one extreme or the other. So, yes, I have to say my leadership style is birthed from the things I wished leaders had done differently. A lot of times either they were leaders who were really personable or really nice but they lacked knowledge and skill or vice versa. So for me it is about being extremely well-versed in both. You can't just be personable and not have the skill set needed to accomplish the goals, especially in education. A balance must be struck between the art of developing relationships with people and the science of the content.

Plus, you have to get the work done. In education you have to meet the bottom line—educating children. So, I got the work done. If I didn't, I would need to be held accountable for that. Also, when you think of education—education it is three-fold. It is the acquisition of knowledge. It has a social impact and it is a moral agent. It must be holistic. You can't tap dance on morals. Morality enables society to persist. Socially, you live in a world bigger than you and what will be your contribution? Then there is the acquisition of knowledge, which is the measurement or assessment of skill sets. All of that goes together holistically, so when I think about those three things, I think this is what we must do for our children and for each other.

### **Discussion of Participants' Narrative Data**

In summation, three main themes emerged related to what elements of womanism influence the African-American female educational leaders' efforts in helping to close the achievement gap experienced by many African-American students. According to the

participants, teacher leadership was essential in helping them to eliminate the achievement gap experienced by their minority students. It was their experiences as effective classroom leaders that helped to guide the vision each of them had in their leadership roles. Additionally, an aspect that served as a foundation for success within the classroom and with other stakeholders was the ethic of care. Although the participants expressed it in different ways, each saw care as a requirement for effective instruction and leadership. They believed it was what helped to build relationships. Finally, each participant spoke of the importance of high expectations for themselves, of those with whom they work, stakeholders, and students. The consensus was that high expectations helped to produce desired results.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, the principal investigator provided an overview of the data collection process and the organization of the findings, and continued with a narrative summary of each participants' transcripts as they related to the individual research questions. Using the elements of womanism to help shape and guide the interview questions, various themes appeared. These theme were: a mentor is a must, teacher leadership, relationships, activism, overcoming stereotypes, a strong sense of self, a vocation, breaking barriers, care, and high expectations. The data revealed that these themes were evident in all aspects of the participants' career in education. In Chapter 5, these themes will be interpreted, and the thematic outcomes as they apply to existing practice and future research will be discussed.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Introduction

The intent of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the lived experiences of African-American female educational leaders who embody womanist characteristics and to identify how the following five factors have influenced their practices in educational leadership: (a) activism, (b) the knowledge and acceptance of multiple identities, (c) the usage of motherwit and othermothering (d) the care ethic, and (e) the breaking of barriers. Historically, Black women have been absent from a lot of the academic theorizing and research in education, as they were never the core around which the conventional projects of dominant femininity and teaching were developed (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Foster, 1993). Additionally, the feminization of the profession in the 19th century and the incessant denigration of the profession as “women’s work” (Preston, 1995) are societal constructs that ensured a largely female work force would share particular White, middle-class, feminine values that mitigated against other examples of personal and social transformation (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). Much of the available research was stereotypical and negative, and was often used to misrepresent African-American cultural and instructional practices (Patterson et al., 2011).

Yet, the success of many African-American students has been linked to the influence of African-American educators (Foster, 1997; Irvine, 2002; Patterson et al., 2011; Siddle-Walker, 2000). Therefore, in recent years, scholars (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, 2005; Case, 1997; Dixson, 2003; Foster, 1993, 1997; Frederick & View, 2009; Howard, 2001; Irvine, 2002; Mitchell, 1998; Patterson et al., 2011; Ware, 2006) have begun to report on the specific cultural and pedagogical practices of exemplary African-

American educators. This research added to the growing body of knowledge and served as an alternative story to the dominant narrative that African-American educators are less effective by highlighting the life experiences of exemplary African-American female educational leaders. In addition, this research shed light on more (or more unconventional) ways all leaders in the public school arena can most effectively impact the educational experience of their students.

The central research question at the core of this study was: How do African-American female educational leaders embrace and exemplify womanism plays within their professional lives? Additionally, three subquestions guided this qualitative research:

1. What do the characteristics of womanism mean to African-American female educational leaders?
2. What perceived role do womanist characteristics have in the professional practices and leadership styles of African-American female educational leaders?
3. What elements of womanism influence the African-American female educational leader's efforts in helping to close the achievement gap experienced by many students of color?

Nine themes emerged from the data: (a) a mentor is a must, (b) teacher leadership, (c) activism, (d) overcoming stereotypes, (e) a strong sense of self, (f) a vocation (g) breaking barriers, (h) care, and (i) high expectations. These themes represent the way womanism manifested itself in the lives of the participants.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

**Research Question 1.** The participants were asked questions so that they could describe what the characteristics of womanism meant to them as African-American female educational leaders. Their responses served as a foundation for understanding how

African-American female educational leaders embrace and exemplify womanist characteristics within their professional lives. In order to generate the responses needed to answer the research question, this portion of the interview centered on the nuances of each of the womanist characteristics. Consequently, the following themes represent the meaning womanist characteristics had in the lives of the participants: (a) a strong sense of self, (b) breaking of barriers, and (c) education as a vocation.

**A strong sense of self.** A review of the literature on womanism showed the link between recognizing the multiple identities African-American women face—and how those identities intersect at various times in one’s life—to the construction of one’s self-perception through familial relations and those with other influential females. This link can be connected to Helms’s (1990) womanist identity model. This model is constructed in four stages that involve a moving away from passive acceptance of external definitions of womanhood to the active creation of one’s own vision of what it means to be a woman as well as a woman of color (Carter & Parks, 1996). The participants in this study reflected the later stage of this identity model through the development of their own sense of self.

The results revealed that each participant understood the perceptions others tended to have of her based on common stereotypes of what it means to be African-American, female, and at times of a lower socioeconomic class. Each participant also demonstrated a link to the literature through her resistance to these stereotypical images. “Resisting by doing something that ‘is not expected’ could not have occurred without Black women’s long-standing rejection of mummies, matriarchs, and other controlling images” (Collins, 2000, p. 98). However, with a realistic understanding of these external definitions, each participant developed her own personalized vision of what it meant to be

a woman of color. As Cathy asserted, “I created an image for myself.” Cathy, the eldest of the participants and the one most familiar with overt racism, decided consciously to be the one in charge of the way others perceived her by crafting a persona. This was an authoritative decision in an effort to control outside perception. Therefore, this knowledge of oneself, exhibited by Cathy, involved the dismantling of stereotypes as they related to all Black women and embracing who she was despite the negative historical narratives associated with her race and gender. This was also the case for Saniyah, who discussed stereotypes:

In an effort to counter the perceptions of who they [those who do not identify themselves as African-American] think Black people are, all of which again, are based on my childhood assumptions and experiences, I do those things. As a result, I know I am going to change their perceptions about me and I am going to change who they think a Black woman is that day.

Additionally, the data revealed that although much of the literature highlighted the disempowering effect of society’s political power structure’s imposition of controlling images and assumptions (Chikwendu, 2103; Crenshaw, 1993; Wilkins, 2012), these participants, like other women of color, found power within their position. This discovery coincides with Collins (2000):

The resolve to define oneself by Black women reframes the entire conversation from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image...to one that stresses the power dynamics fundamental in the very process of definition itself. By demanding self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. (114)

Aniyah continued:

To be honest, though, my Blackness has worked for me and against me in the world of education. I love it when you have non-African-Americans and they have all these theories and these great hypotheses about what might be wrong with kids and then I go in and provide the correct information. I am able to say what I need to say, while speaking the language of the common man.

Adopting the more acceptable forms of communication common in the world of education had been a struggle for Aniyah. She did not come from similar backgrounds as those with whom she worked, and it manifested in their communication styles. Her co-workers and supervisors were typically from homes and schools indicative of higher socioeconomic status. Aniyah suggested that her experiences were comparable to those she served: working class homes to those who lived in poverty. As a result, when her attempts to mirror communication styles became futile, Aniyah was forced to define for herself what it meant to be a woman of color, from a lower socioeconomic background, who was just as qualified (or more) as those with whom and for she worked, despite outside assumptions and influences. In order to accomplish her redefinition of self, Aniyah questioned those whom she felt had the power to define, questioned why she allowed them to take her power away, and then consciously found a way to take her power back. Once she took ownership of who she was and wanted to be, it manifested in her being comfortable with communication style. She ceased to allowed the differences in ways of communication to seemingly determine her worth or what she was able to contribute. As a result, she found power in being herself.

The study results and the literature both revealed the importance of self-definition in regard to leadership for women of color. For the participants, self-definition seemed to be a requirement for effective leadership. Once each woman determined who she wanted to be in the world while putting traditional expectations aside and realizing assimilation was not a place of comfort for her, she was able to be effective in her career.

**Breaking barriers.** Historically, African-American educators have used education as a way to transgress, to take risk, to break barriers, and to achieve freedom (hooks, 1994). For the participants, the breaking of barriers was not intended simply for

personal achievement or satisfaction. The findings revealed that each woman's quest to tear down walls, jump over obstacles, or shatter glass ceilings had a greater purpose. These findings mirrored the studies that suggest that, for the womanist foremother, breaking barriers is her effort to enlighten, pave the way, and to fight for racial uplift (Giles, 2006, Loder, 2005b; Murtadha & Watts, 2005).

Saniyah achieved the goal of becoming a principal by the age of 30. She explained,

This was for two reasons. I wanted children to actually see age is only a number and that you can achieve heights beyond your imagination at any time in your life and also I wanted them to see a Black woman do this.

Saniyah's goals were not simply personal aspirations, but were testimonies. She wanted her achievements to speak to the children she served. Her work, the rewards, and accolades that came with it were lessons she was administering to her students. These were lessons that told each child to ignore normality and create their own normal. Saniyah's motivation was consistent with what the literature presented.

Cathy once took a big risk by standing up for the rights of her students despite the potential for putting her job in jeopardy. She understood that for African-American women, the fight for equality was not achieved through the traditional definitions of activism, but by individuals taking advantage of existing opportunities to fight personal and/or group oppressions (Collins, 2000). Cathy explained how, alone, she challenged the school system's mandates twice and decided her school was not going to participate or go along with what was proposed. In both instances, going along with the system's proposed agenda could have interfered with her students' progress or stopped it altogether.

In once instance, when faced with opening a school that was structurally unsound, Cathy had to think quickly to remedy the situation. She knew the school board was not

planning to fix a building they were soon going to sell and one that was housed in a low-income community. As the literature revealed what many women of color did before her, Cathy had to be creative in her tactics. She did not go to her superiors because she knew she would not get the support needed to achieve the desired results, so she had to use her wit to find a better solution.

In the other instance, when Cathy felt her students' academic progress was in danger due to new school board mandates, she realized she had to challenge their agenda. In doing so, she was aware that her job could have been taken away. Yet, for Cathy, the students' progress and self-image were worth fighting for. She explained, "You see, I had to fight things like that. I knew what would work for my kids and I was not going to let anything stop their success."

Reba and Aniyah also knew the opportunities afforded to them in the field of education were chances to do what other studies revealed: use education as a movement that did away with boundaries and made education the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). Many times both Reba and Aniyah found themselves the only representatives of any minority group sitting with the educational decision makers. They understood that they carried with them the concerns and issues the minority populations faced. Both women ran into potential obstacles when in these situations. However, in order to have an impact on those who could not speak for themselves, they worked to break down the individual barriers their situations presented.

Reba's barrier was her educational experience versus that of her coworkers. The differences in educational exposure surfaced in the varying ways she and her coworkers processed and analyzed information. The difference between she and her colleagues initially caused Reba to be ignored. However, when she embraced her own competence,

those walls fell down.

People started to see the results I achieved and people began to listen. However, I did it my way. I knew things were different when I got invited to go to the US Department of Education to participate on a team who would be speaking with Arne Duncan [United States Secretary of Education].

Aniyah also faced communication barriers. However, as in Reba's experience, the walls came down when she stopped focusing on differences and began to embrace her individual communication style. It eventually became a place of power for her.

It has encouraged me to speak the language of the people, do things with simplicity and understanding, and let passion fuel everything I do, and do all of this while still showing my intelligence. Honestly, it benefits me more.

As with many womanists, using this approach to activism forced Aniyah to do away with societal expectations and create a new reality for herself (Bloom & Erlandson, 2004; Collins, 2000; Oesterreich, 2007). She was able to have control over her self-definitions and self-valuations, and those in her circle were encouraged to do the same (Collins, 2000). As a result, new possibilities developed for her and the community while she allowed herself to remove the façade or mask of superficially simultaneously as a result of adhering to prevailing rules and expectations (Collins, 2000; Ramsey, 2012).

Each participant's experience with the breaking of barriers within the field of education is based on hook's (1994) assertion that all in all, the survival and the future of the urban community could and can still be found in the schoolhouse (1994). Like the womanist educational leaders before them, each woman's fight was to ensure that children got what they needed in order to be prepared for life beyond the schoolhouse. This study's results revealed that in their quest for equality, the participants found confrontational and/or creative ways to break down barriers and to challenge dominance by shaping spheres of influence that resisted oppressive structures by undermining them

instead of confronting them directly (Collins, 2000).

**A vocation.** Being an educator is not simply a job; it is a vocation, a calling, and a responsibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2004; Loder, 2005a). This was true for the participants in this study. Just as their foremothers, contemporary African-American women, particularly in education, feel compelled to work for the disenfranchised (Case, 1997; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Maparyan, 2011). According to Frame, Williams, and Green (1999), “[S]pirituality permeates all aspects of life, for many African Americans and African American women in particular are connected to one another, their culture, their past, and their future through a broad understanding of spirituality” (p. 187). For the womanist, spirituality is palpable and real, and the relationship between it and humanity is neither abstract nor separate from politics and activism (Phillips, 2006). Therefore, various forms or expressions of spirituality undergirded many of the participants’ responses.

Saniyah stated, “I live according to my spirit, like my former principal, I have a peace because where I serve and work is my calling.” During her interviews she made it clear that she did not separate her role as an educator from her spiritual practice. They were one and the same. She was able to put her spiritual beliefs to practice when she worked with children. Each lesson was an opportunity to teach beyond the textbook and to prepare students to be contributing citizens ready to change the world.

Cathy equated what she did—and encouraged others in education to do through her—to a version of the Golden Rule, “Treat these students the way you would want someone to treat your children.” As an educational leader, she was asking those in charge of teaching children to foster relationships with those under their tutelage. She was, in essence, encouraging othermothering as a way to relate to children. By doing this she was

asking teachers to nurture, protect, observe, guide, prepare, and care for the children they teach.

Reba attributed her success in education to a spiritual gift given to her by God. Although she started her postsecondary education thinking she was going to be a medical doctor, she explained that God showed her otherwise. “He told me, ‘Yes, I have gifted you to heal but it will not be through western medicine.’” She took that message to mean that her job as an educator was to heal hearts and minds. This was evidenced in the way she approached her work. Listening to Reba tell her story, the principal researcher could not miss the scientific analogies. Although Reba was no longer in the science field, she used much of that knowledge to help her diagnose the needs of her students, staff, and mentees.

Aniyah also spoke of her profession in terms of ministry:

Yeah, it is nothing less than a ministry. When I think of the patience of a teacher I think of the patience of Job. Doing things with decency and order. Doing things with love. Letting love fuel everything you do. Christ was a teacher. It is a ministry.

Aniyah’s words reflect those of Walker’s (1993) definition of womanism when she stated that a womanist “Loves the Spirit”. Although the definition does not directly reference Christianity, and seemingly leaves all spiritual beliefs to be included, it does have indications of the “Christian mysticism that undergirds the most radical actions of [African-American] foremothers and continues to spill over in to the lives of the most secular of black women activist” (Sanders, Cannon, Townes, & Gilkes, 1989, p. 151). This was the case for Aniyah. Everything that she did in her profession was connected to her Christian faith. She explained that from the order she kept in her class, to the way she interacted with teacher fellows, all of it was in some way connected to the Scriptures in

the Christian Bible.

**Summary of findings for Research Question 1.** The themes that emerged from this research question supported three found in the womanist framework: (a) the battle against invisibility and silencing and the fight to obliterate the controlling images that continue to belittle them, (b) empowerment within their everyday life, and (c) the role of spirituality in fighting and dealing with oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 2000; Comas-Diaz, 2008; Giles, 2006; Hamlet, 2000; Ogunyemi, 1985; Weems, 1993). Considering the themes together, it appeared that, to the participants, the characteristics of womanism meant ignoring outside expectations and determining for oneself, through research and experience, what being a person of color and true womanhood meant. Therefore, based on the data, the definition of womanhood and a person of color were fluid and individualistic, and created a sense of freedom that promoted a seemingly unmovable confidence and power. This confidence and power was coupled with responsibility to change perceptions, uplift, pave the way, and unify. The responsibility the participants felt was unanimously linked to a spiritual calling. All of these factors, taken together point to intrinsically motivated leaders committed to something larger than themselves with the intention to use education as a vehicle to bring positive change to the world.

**Research Question 2.** Three themes emerged about the perceived role womanist characteristics have in the professional practices and leadership styles of African-American female educational leaders. The themes were: a mentor is a must, activism, and overcoming stereotypes.

**A mentor is a must.** According to research, the motherline is a collection of Black women who help play an important role in educating other Black women, when it

comes to addressing the systematic politics of suppression, by enforcing self-love, societal analysis, opposition to oppression, and belief in the ability of the self to transform the world (Case, 1997; Guiffrida, 2005; King & Ferguson, 2011). Motherwit is the information passed on through this lineage of women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Case, 1997; King & Ferguson, 2011). It was surprising, then, when the results revealed that for the participants, the individuals who fulfilled the obligations of those within the motherline and who passed on motherwit were not always women, nor always African-American women. Rather, they were those who helped to propel each woman's career, provide professional and personal guidance and direction, offered encouragement and motivation, saw potential, and helped the women navigate unfamiliar terrains at times under the umbrella of womanhood, sisterhood, racial uplift, compassion, and responsibility.

Two women were very influential in Saniyah's growth as an educational leader, one at the start of her career and the other as her career progressed. The first was a Black woman who saw her potential and gave her a plethora of opportunities to learn and grow. The other was a White woman who pushed her to perfection and, when the time came to release her, told Saniyah (as if understanding the traditional role of othermothers and the motherline), "I have taken you as far as I can. I know you can go far, but I think now you need a powerful Black female mentor."

Saniyah believed the contributions each woman gave to her were priceless. One of the women taught her how to be a leader in an atmosphere where she was a member of the minority. She passed on these lessons by giving Saniyah all the leadership positions possible and simultaneously guiding her through each one. Additionally, she showed Saniyah how to embrace her ethnicity and invent her own brand of professionalism,

which included intertwining acceptable professional customs and expectations with her own cultural norms. This experience seemed to serve as the foundation of Saniyah's journey toward self-definition.

The other mentor in Saniyah's life was not a member of her race but an older White woman with whom she immediately connected. Saniyah explained how she learned the importance of being prepared and extremely knowledgeable about her craft, even more than those with whom she would come into contact. Moreover, Saniyah also learned the value and power of authentic communication, which is something she prided herself on using as a tool for effective leadership.

The impact of these two women on Saniyah's life seemed to be symbolic of two sides merging together to create the educational womanist leader she is today. She is a brave leader who consistently finds herself in positions in which she is the only minority. However, she has learned to minimize stigmas or stereotypes associated with her status as a minority woman by forming her own definition of what it means to be a professional woman of color who is knowledgeable, prepared, and who engages others in authentic and meaningful dialogue.

Cathy, whose career as an educational leader was initially suggested by a White male mentor, eventually became a mentor herself to a plethora of aspiring leaders in the field of education. Cathy stated, "I started mentoring because [as an up-and-coming leader] you do have to have someone mentoring you." She understood the importance of continuing a legacy of leadership and doing so through guidance and the passing on of knowledge. Therefore, what initially started as an individual effort began to grow and others of influence began to help. "Before you knew it, we had a whole network. We were mentoring and working with African-Americans because there was a need to get

more of us in decision-making roles within the district,” she explained.

Aniyah was also influenced by strong mentors. Like others, her mentors were not always Black women. In her youth and early adult life, she was influenced heavily by a significant group of African-American women who helped her during her darkest hours and pushed her as far as they could with the limited amount of exposure they had at their disposal. For example, her mother, a central figure in her life, helped to shape the fundamental elements that served as a foundation for her leadership style, life lessons, and motherwit. Aniyah described her mother:

She broke things down so that I understood why we were doing things. She taught math from a moral standpoint. Everything was tied to something. . . . Every day, as far back as I can remember she would always say, “Early to bed, early to rise” or “In all your getting, get understanding.”

As a teacher and educational leader, Aniyah used many of the same lessons and words of wisdom passed to her by her own mother to help others see connection and relevance. For Aniyah, who came into the field after leaving a successful career, education was new and she did not have the benefit of extensive training. Therefore, the wit and tutelage she received from her mother was what she drew from to help her meet the needs of her students. However, a turning point in her professional life came under the mentorship of a White female. According to Aniyah, they were able to bond because they were both women in a male dominated profession. Therefore, in an act of solidarity, this woman passed on knowledge to Aniyah that would forever shape how she approached her professional life. “She taught me what being successful in this position looked like. This lady taught me . . . [that] everything she did was intentional.” As a result of this solidarity, Aniyah approached everything systematically. In her interview, she revealed that this mentor taught her that everything was done for a reason and in order to be effective you

had to understand purpose. Therefore, Aniyah began to approach everything with the end in mind because she was taught that purpose should help to drive all decision making.

Unlike the other participants, Reba stated that she did not have the opportunity to be guided by a mentor. Her spiritual beliefs in a higher power served to be the motivation and support that helped her along her professional journey. However, she understood the importance of having a mentor and recognized how her professional experiences may have been different under the influence of someone who had already walked down the road she was traveling. Regardless of lacking this influence, Reba depended on her faith and spiritual study to guide her decision making. “I did not have a person. The Holy Spirit was my mentor. If, from the beginning, I had someone who was really pushing me, I am sure I would have been a much more successful student than I was.”

Although Reba was adamant that the experience she had as a result of not having a mentor was a large part of her success as an educational leader, not having a mentor was one of the reasons she gave for becoming one. She wanted to give others what she did not have. For most of her career, she relied solely on herself and there was a lot of fear associated with her experiences. Consequently, she was very aware that the presence of someone with more wisdom than she had could have made her professional life and decisions a lot easier.

**Activism.** For African-American women, activism can manifest itself in various forms. “...because the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power work together to produce particular patterns of domination, [as a result] Black women’s activism demonstrates a comparable complexity” (Collins, 2000, p. 203). Therefore, her fight occurred during everyday experiences (Collins, 2000; Oesterreich, 2007; Sernak, 2004). The data from this study revealed that this was true for each of the

participants.

Saniyah, who was given the name Assata Shakur by her peers, was known for her daily expressions of activism. She said,

They call me The Activist. It shows up every day. When I am advocating for my teachers to get better resources, I am an activist. When I am demanding that teachers provide quality educational experiences for my students, I am an activist.

The interviews revealed that for Saniyah, every day as an educational leader was an opportunity to fight oppression. She explained her belief that education should go beyond simply instructing students in academics; it should train them to be critical thinkers who challenge injustice and work to end it. This explanation reflected the belief that teaching individuals to be self-sufficient promoted more empowerment than teaching them how to be followers (Collins, 2000). Additionally, Saniyah, who led a school with a predominately Black population, “saw the activist potential of education and skillfully used [this] Black female sphere of influence to foster a definition of education as a cornerstone of Black community development” (Collins, 2000, p. 210).

Similarly, Reba found ways to act on behalf of students and families who needed assistance through less traditional methods of activism. Her fight to combat the negative stereotypes hindering African-American boys was manifested through the creation of a male mentoring group that put boys and men together in order to talk, heal, learn from, and have fun together, as well as through research-based professional development. Reba’s efforts mirror those of African-American female activists who usually never worked exclusively on behalf of the female, but took on issues impacting the entire community (Collins, 2000). Therefore, even as the founder of the organization, she was never wholeheartedly a part of any of the meetings. That was not her agenda. She simply saw a need, and took strides to meet it.

Like Reba and the other participants, Saniyah's display of activism took place in her classroom by doing what much of the literature revealed has been done by educators of color for years. She said she "...prepared [her] students using brute honesty and direct and strict instruction, for the unfortunate realities of racism" (Bloom & Erlandson, 2004; Roseboro & Ross, 2009; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). Saniyah could not separate this type of education from the more traditional role because both were essential in ensuring her students were going to be successful, productive, and contributing citizens.

Unlike the other participants, as a child of the Civil Rights Movement, Cathy had numerous opportunities to participate in both traditional and nontraditional forms of activism. She remembered being a part of sit-ins and marches. Yet, she also vividly remembered countering unethical behavior during her professional career using wit and whatever else she had at her disposal—understanding that one of the most important characteristics of an effective leader was being able to recognize what you had and how it could be manipulated and beneficial. Cathy's interviews revealed the crafting of Black female spheres of influence, "which resist oppressive structures by undermining them" (Collins, 2000, p. 204). As reflected in the literature, in order to resist these oppressive structures, one must meet them with a free and independent consciousness that enables them to undermine the rules governing their employment and garner control over the conditions of their work (Collins, 2000). Cathy took control over whom she wanted to be in the world, thereby gaining a sense of freedom that allowed her to think beyond her circumstances and achieve the results she needed in order to be an effective educational leader.

**Overcoming stereotypes.** Although each participant was able to define who she was and did so on her own terms, each one still had to deal with elements of prejudice

and racism. These judgments stemmed from preconceived beliefs individuals [who are not of color or female] had about what it meant to be Black and a woman, and many times a young woman. As Saniyah asserted:

I come in...hoping to experience love, joy, and peace with everyone I am going to meet, greet, and interact with that day. Yet, other people's perceptions of me, their actions, and their behaviors make me take a step back and say, "Okay, Saniyah, don't forget that you are a young Black woman walking into this space."

Saniyah is often reminded of her darker complexion, Afrocentric features, and age.

Reba had to contend with the sexist expectations placed on her by the Black male educational leaders with whom she has worked, and Aniyah found that many make assumptions about her qualifications and intelligence based on her communication style and ethnicity. However, each of these women has turned what may have started out as a hindrance into a powerful tool. In doing so, she has enacted a form of resistance that has enabled her to have control over her self-definitions and self-valuations and encourage those in her community to do the same (Collins, 2000).

Saniyah made a conscious effort to put aside societal expectations on what it meant to be a powerful, professional, and beautiful. She then constructed an image for herself and developed a more holistic understanding about humanity that helped her communicate with people beyond the limits of racism and prejudice. Reba dealt with negative assumptions and insecurities associated with differences between her educational background and the backgrounds of those with whom she worked. However, once she embraced her own unique method of strategizing and leadership, which differed from her colleagues, she was able to achieve success beyond even her own imagination and gain the respect of her peers in the industry. For Aniyah, gaining her power had to do with finding her own voice, a voice that did not speak the same language as many of her

coworkers. Once she realized she would not be successful at mirroring their communication style, she saw the beauty in her own. She realized she spoke the language of the common man. It was simple and to the point. It may not have been laced with educational jargon, but it was laced with the experiences of everyday people.

Unlike the other participants, Cathy did not discuss any particular stereotypes except for an occasional mention of her age that came earlier in her career. It became clear that people's perceptions of her served as a footnote to other goals she sought to accomplish. According to Cathy, "I never allowed my race, or the fact that I was a female, interfere or stop me from being what I knew I could be or stop what I needed to get done." This mindset can be possibly attributed to her age and experience. She grew up in an era in which racism was more overt. According to Cathy, "Growing up in the South, I was definitely discriminated against. Our schools were segregated.... When integration started you had people lying in the streets to keep the buses from bringing the Black children in." Therefore, it can be inferred that, during this era in the country's history, a person of color experienced life already aware of persistent racism and therefore it took on an existence so normal that it became irrelevant.

The themes that emerged from this research question supported many of the elements of the womanist framework, but four in particular were dominant: (a) the importance of working together with all others in order to create a global society where everyone thrives and survives, (b) the dominant and central role of the woman in combating oppressive forces, (c) the battle against invisibility and silencing and the fight to obliterate the controlling images that continue to belittle them, and (d) empowerment within their everyday life (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 2000; Comas-Diaz, 2008; Giles, 2006; Hamlet, 2000; Ogunyemi, 1985; Weems, 1993). For the participants, the

perceived role womanism had in their professional practices and leadership styles was the ability to learn and work under and with others who had gone before them as well as those with the same agenda and purpose. It meant standing up for those who could not stand for themselves, and incessantly dismantling mindsets that limited global progression and unity.

**Research Question 3.** Three themes surfaced when participants were asked questions in order to determine the elements of womanism that influence the African-American female educational leader's efforts in helping to close the achievement gap experienced by many students of color. The themes were: teacher leadership, high expectations, and care.

**Teacher leadership.** Prior to embarking on a career in educational leadership, each participant excelled within the classroom as teacher leaders. As teacher leaders, they exhibited skills consistent with what the literature indicated are characteristics of effective educational leadership. They increased student achievement scores; built relationships with parents, students, and other stakeholders; created extracurricular clubs and organizations; participated in ongoing professional development; and led committees (Kurland et al., 2010; Milanowski, 2011). Two of the participants were considered exemplary teachers and served as models for others within their district. Three of the women had administrators who recognized their leadership skills and encouraged them to pursue this role in education.

Cathy asserted, "When I began as a first grade teacher there, I took on extracurricular activities and added responsibilities...I was doing a bit of everything. I practically ran the whole school." The data revealed that Cathy took on so much added responsibility that it got the attention of many of her superiors, which led to her transition

into educational leadership. The work she was doing expanded her sphere of influence from primarily in the classroom to the entire schoolhouse. Yet, she excelled in the classroom and was noted for the work she did with her students. All of these experiences as classroom leader prepared her to lead other teachers.

Reba's experience was similar. She stated, "I really spread my wings at this school. I led professional development and summer school. I also became the internal voice on how to best educate our Black male students." When Reba spoke about her experience in the classroom, she touched on the importance of being a culturally relevant educator, especially in regard to relating to African-American boys. She "helped students make connections between their community, national, and global identities" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 38). Reba also discussed the importance of relationships with students extending beyond the classroom walls (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In order to accomplish this, she established an after-school mentoring group for minority males. With the guidance of older males, students read and discussed a book that spoke to their unique experience and how it has influenced and impacted society. This group also allowed time for the young men and elders to talk about issues that impacted them in a place of safety and nonjudgment. As a teacher of African-Americans, particularly African-American males, Reba acknowledged the importance of understanding them as individuals and their culture and infused this knowledge into her teacher's pedagogy. Additionally, she embraced the concept of school going beyond the limits of time, place, and person. For Reba, school and learning had no barriers and sometimes required thinking outside of tradition.

Regarding leadership roles, Saniyah said, "The principal put me through every possible training available for teachers in the county." The principal served as a mentor

and knew of Saniyah's desire to transition into educational administration, saw her talent in the classroom, and pushed her to perfect her skills and techniques. This training led Saniyah to be recognized as a model teacher within the district. When Saniyah elaborated on her time in the classroom, she too spoke of culturally relevant pedagogy and relationship building. Both elements were fundamental in her role as a teacher. Her relationships with her students were, "fluid, humanely equitable [and] demonstrated a connectedness with all students" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 60). She empowered each student to be knowledgeable of who they were and where they came from, and as a class family they celebrated these differences while embracing how each individual contributed to the effectiveness of the group. For Saniyah, this was not just an attempt at creating harmony within her class; it was recognizing her place as a political being preparing her students to face a world of inequalities with confidence and self-awareness (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

Like the other participants, Saniyah's work in the classroom was noticed by her superiors and other coworkers. She discussed the recognition:

I was asked to present at the district leadership conference. From there I was recruited or asked to serve as a staff development coordinator for the district while I still taught. Again none of these things were things I was looking for. I guess people saw things in me I most definitely did not see in myself.

People saw Saniyah embracing her role as othermother to her students. As revealed in the literature, exemplary African-American female classroom educators use familiar and mother-child relationships as a guide for their interactions with students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Saniyah spoke of how her students referred to her as "Mama" and how she was just as concerned with letting them down as they were of letting their biological parents down. She said she used this influence and trust to motivate her students to meet

her high expectations.

**High expectations.** In addition to being teacher leaders in the classroom, the participants encouraged those under their leadership to be the same. According to a review of the literature, there are seven standards educational leaders should follow in order to promote the success of every student. Those standards are (a) facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders; (b) advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth; (c) ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment; (d) collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources; (e) acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner; and (f) understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 14).

During the interviews, examples of these standards were evident within the participants' responses. For example, when Sanayah talked about her role as principal at a local charter school she stated, "My goal was to get quality teachers, and to expose the kids. As soon as I came on, I was training teachers." To this end, she went on a campaign to remove ineffective educators and to hire qualified teachers. She knew coming into her position that the previous principal was adamant about culture and that her job was to work on the quality of instruction students were receiving. Therefore, she chose and maintained teachers who cared about students and taught them as if they were teaching their own children.

In addition, Saniyah modeled expectations. For example, she provided training on how to have productive parent-teacher conferences in which educators would act out various scenarios and discuss effective ways to handle the situations. Saniyah believed that having high expectations began with modeling what one desired to see and expected from staff.

Cathy also had certain expectations of her teachers. These expectations helped to ensure that the school provided an optimal learning environment for all of the students.

By the end of the year, the teachers that remained were really performing. They were planning well and those plans were visible. They knew the curriculum backwards and forward and knew how to work with kids. They had an effective classroom management plan and corrected behaviors in a caring way. They practiced the Golden Rule which is to treat the kids we educate the way we would want someone to treat our own kids. When you walked in their classes there was 100% Engagement 100% of the time.

Cathy knew she had extremely high expectations, but she also knew that those teachers who really understood what it took to provide students with an optimal educational experience would rise to the challenge. She noted that those who did not see her vision left their position at the school. However, there were many who stayed. As a result, every year the list of candidates for teaching positions grew. The expectations Cathy placed on herself and her staff created a welcoming environment and culture that encouraged learning. People saw this and wanted to be a part of it.

For Reba, it was all about community involvement. After working hard to transform her school using the efforts of everyone, they found themselves on the brink of closure. In attempts to fight this, Reba was able to rally her school community together because of the relationships she had already developed with them.

I had to figure out how to literally transform school culture. So, by the end of that year we had gotten awards for our school culture. The state had come to visit us. My state representative was looking at our work. Everyone wanted to know what

we were doing. It was night and day. It was a transformation. That is something that I am really proud of. It was no magic. We did not hire consultants. I was the fool that was like, “Y’all these are kids. Ain’t no kid gone run nothing while I am around.” So my mantra was, “The adults set the tone in the building, not the kids.” It worked.

What I didn’t not know was that the city had a larger plan for the neighborhood—gentrification. When I got there we had more building than kids. It could hold 600, but we only had 300. Even though we had made gains, the city already had plans and decided to fade the school out. As the kids graduated, we would take in no more. I was like, Whoa! We are going to contest it. That was my first taste at organizing. I organized a group and we had parents, students, etc... We did this campaign. It wasn’t as big as I felt we needed it to be but it was noticeable. Grassroots, before I knew what it was.

Given the knowledge she had, Reba could have quietly let time pass, and the doors would simply close. However, the same belief she had in her staff, parents, and students prior to learning they were shutting the school down was the same belief she had in them when they decided to fight. For Reba, it was as simple as knowing they were dealing with children and that her staff members were adults. Therefore, they were more than capable of getting the job done.

**Care.** On the surface, when the participants made comments such as, “I have to hear that a teacher cares,” it was easy to assume they were speaking of what Noddings (2003) called the ethic of care, and in part they were. However, upon further analysis of their responses, a more complex definition of what it meant to care emerged. For the participants, as for many other African-American educators, caring involves a mistrust of the system that leads to a legend of resistance (Roseboro & Ross, 2009). This resistance is what caused them to provide students an education for the purpose of transgression (hooks, 1994). Educating to transgress is one of the fundamental elements of womanist caring. Reba, who organized her male empowerment group, did so understanding the issues men of color have to face in the world of education and in society. Therefore, she

wanted to provide them with the knowledge and tools to combat the oppression they may come against.

Cathy fought against the mistreatment of her school community strategically when she demanded renovations of the school facilities. Knowing that, even in her position as principal, simply making a call or sending a memo was not going to render the results she needed, she had to be creative in her approach. This creativity proved successful. Cathy exhibited the womanist caring shown in the literature when she used her authority and power strategically to counter structures of oppression (Bloom & Erlandson, 2004; Roseboro & Ross, 2009; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010).

Aniyah, also known as Mama W. to her students, practiced an element of womanist care called othermothering. This is when the leader is expected to focus on the child's entire wellbeing socially, emotionally and financially (Mawhinney, 2012). This unique notion of care encompasses a major aspect of the ethic of care—embrace of the maternal—but is also grounded in political clarity and the ethic of risk (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Patterson et al., 2011). Aniyah focused on the whole child by taking on the maternal role for her students in the absence of their biological mothers. Aniyah discussed the relationship:

The students would always say, “Mrs. W. is our ‘school mom,’” See, I grew up poor, but I knew my mother loved me. So I know what the manifestation of othermothering did for my students. They worked hard because they did not want to let me down.

This same example of care was demonstrated when Saniyah spoke about meeting the fundamental needs of her students by providing breakfast, clothing, soap, snacks, and other necessities. She knew there were those in her class whose families could not always afford to provide their children with these items, but she also understood that the students

could not perform to their optimal level without them. Like Saniyah, all of the participants understood that othermothering and teaching to remove boundaries demanded an ethic of care that is simultaneously cynical and practical, personified and performed, private and public (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Patterson et al., 2011; Ramsey, 2012; Roseboro & Ross, 2009).

### **Central Question**

At the beginning of the study, the principal researcher intended to answer a central research question: How do African-American female educational leaders embrace and exemplify womanist characteristics within their professional lives?

The study has shown that the elements of womanism are essential aspects of the participants' professional lives and have contributed to the success each has experienced in their roles as educational leaders. Nine themes emerged from the data: (a) a mentor is a must, (b) teacher leadership, (c) activism, (d) overcoming stereotypes, (e) a strong sense of self, (f) a vocation, (g) breaking barriers, (h) care, and (i) high expectations. These themes represent the unique way womanism manifests itself in the lived experiences of these African-American female educational leaders. Additionally, these themes, though comparative to those of the womanist framework, are also comparative to effective educational leadership standards and skills.

From these findings, it is evident that the participants bring a plethora of abilities, experiences, and competencies that enable them to have a positive effect on the schools they represent, the individuals they train, and the lives of the children they serve. Although these themes represent personal qualities of leadership and extend beyond the more traditional ones found in literature, they have greatly contributed to the accomplishment of each participant.

## **Implications of Findings**

**Current and future African-American female administrators.** There are numerous ways the information in this study is beneficial. For example, it benefits African-American women entering and remaining in educational leadership positions that service urban areas within the United States. Many public and charter schools located in urban areas service those students who must contend with similar issues: low test scores and grades, high dropout rates, low attendance, generally unmotivated students, burned-out and ineffective teachers, poor facilities, administrations hopelessly mired in politicized and inefficient bureaucracies, and an endless series of reforms that never seem to lead to genuine improvement (Noguera, 2003). Moreover, the number of African-American females serving in educational administration is growing and they are the ones who usually take on administrative roles in large urban schools (Brown, 2005; Taylor, 2004). Additionally, it is the African-American female who is more than likely going to be hired to lead a predominately Black school versus a predominately White school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). This research can help to guide them and prepare them for the issues they may face when they become leaders of schools within urban areas around the country.

**Educational leadership research.** Despite the lack of literature that focuses on African-American females in education and educational leadership (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Foster, 1993), the academic success of African-American students linked to the influence of African-American educators has been documented in some studies (Foster, 1997; Irvine, 2002; Patterson et al., 2011; Siddle-Walker, 2000). Moreover, African-American principals have been successful in leading schools with both a high population of students from various ethnic backgrounds and from lower

socioeconomic status (Lomotey, 1989). African-American female educational administrators often lead in troubled urban schools (Peters, 2012). Therefore, it is important for researchers and those in the practice to have a clear understanding of the leadership practices of effective African-American female educational leaders.

**Womanist research.** The research on African-American women in educational leadership is sparse. This is also the case for literature on African-American women in leadership. This study can add to the growing research on woman of color in educational leadership, thereby adding to the literature available on African-American females in leadership in general.

**Practitioners working in urban school settings.** Those working with large minority populations, specifically those in urban settings, can benefit from this research by understanding the tools African-American female educational leaders utilize. Collins (1991) asserted that African-American female educational leaders bring Afrocentric concepts of mothering, family, community, and empowerments with their leadership styles. The results from this study align with Collins's (1991) assertion and therefore should be further investigated as possible techniques to use when working with students of color.

**Educational administrations programs.** Prior to *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954), separation was the norm in the United States. However, once integration became a reality, so did the importance of cultural sensitivity. The magnitude of how cultural sensitivity has impacted the field of education has varied historically. In the 1960s, there was a focus on equal access and equal rights. In the 1970s, equal benefits and multiculturalism were emphasized. Diversity was the focus for the 1980s, and presently, a cultural proficiency is predominant. Cultural proficiency “is a way of being

that enables people to engage successfully in new environments” (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009, p. 11). Many principal and teacher preparation programs stress the importance of cultural competency in regard to the implementation of multicultural curriculum and integration. However, they fail to address how race and gender impact education holistically. The findings of this study show that race and gender inequalities continue to exist, and open and honest dialogue is needed in order to address these issues and to prepare future educational administrators of all ethnicities.

Additionally, the leadership styles of African-American educators have been scrutinized in much of the literature as being different and inferior (Lomotey, 1989). This research provides insight as to how the elements of the womanist framework have helped African-American female leaders achieve success with African-American students. This will be beneficial to anyone in training to work with or lead a large population of minority students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

**Varied school demographics.** This research was limited to four participants who were educational leaders in urban settings. Further research should be conducted to examine how the womanist framework manifests in the lived experiences of African-American female educational leaders in various types of school settings and demographics. A succession of additional studies could generate a more inclusive analysis of womanist qualities and beliefs exhibited by African-American female leaders in the field of education.

Another opportunity for research would be the examination of how the womanist framework manifests in the lived experiences of African-American male educational leaders. Such a study would provide insight into whether African-American men

experience the elements of womanism in their personal and professional lives and if so, whether they bring these unique qualities and beliefs into their experience as educational leaders in urban schools.

**Deeper analysis of individual themes.** There were nine themes that emerged from the data could be examined more deeply. A future study could examine the way each one is incorporated into the professional experiences of African-American female and male educational leaders. Such an investigation could also extend to others of various ethnic backgrounds. This type of investigation could discover the role of womanism in the lives of all types of educational leaders, thereby helping to solidify the existence and importance of the framework of womanism in educational leadership research and practice.

**Other professions.** The womanist theoretical framework is a way of viewing the lived experiences of women of color. This means that the field of education is not the only one that would benefit from a similar study. Other professions could use the questions from this study to discover how womanism manifests in the lived experiences of African-American female leaders in various careers fields.

In addition to the questions, the themes that emerged from this study could be used to examine female leaders of color, thereby connecting other fields to the womanist framework in order to gauge how it is manifested in their lived experiences, thus adding to the literature on womanism, women and leadership, and African-American women in leadership.

### **Limitations**

During the completion of this study, a few limitations were identified that may create a need for future research. Participation was limited to four African-American

female leaders who identified with the womanist framework and serviced schools and teachers in urban areas. The small sample size can limit confidence in the findings. Additionally, for this study, the participants were selected using purposeful sampling and the snowballing technique. Therefore, the data does not reflect the entire population the study intended to reflect and could include areas of subjectivity. Furthermore, the study was limited to African-American female leaders who serviced urban areas, and did not include those who are in leadership positions at other types of schools across the country.

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Appendix A

Principal Researcher's Experience with the Phenomenon

*“As an African-American female, I am more than just the sum of collective parts: African-American, female, teacher-educator, scholar, daughter, sister, friend, etc. I am one indivisible being... My life experiences and multiple identities are intertwined, interconnected. I bring all of who I am into the classroom.”*

-Theodora Regina Berry

When I was a little girl, my parents did their best to ensure I had the finest education they could afford. I attended a prestigious private school for two years that was housed in a large mansion located in Atlanta’s historical and affluent Buckhead community. Later, I attended a private Catholic elementary school in the same community. By day, I played with those who were carpooled by nannies; in the afternoon, I rode the city bus and laughed with children like myself, latchkey kids.

This oxymoronic experience was laden with a plethora of experiences that my parents, though well intended, did not expect. The experience of being, in essence, the total opposite from those I attended school with was filled with certain realizations. I realized early that being different was not always good and that some differences are associated with low expectation. Yes, I was provided with the best opportunities academically; however I also learned early that I was, in fact, very different from my classmates.

I learned that most children, at least at my school, actually came from two-parent households and that all mothers did not work. I learned that my home could fit into the living rooms of my classmates’ houses. I learned that I was weird for washing my hair once a week, instead of daily. I learned that my complexion often excluded me from invitations to parties, being a part of certain cliques, and having boyfriends. I learned that all teachers did not believe in the capabilities of all their students. I learned that I was different and, at that age, being different was not always good.

In summation, I learned about racism, a constant fixture in my experience. I would compare the phenomenon to chronic migraine syndrome. Every day I was aware of its presence, yet some days I could avert it. However, when there was no escaping, racism surfaced like the sharp pain of a migraine. It made itself known, and I had to cope with it until it subsided, but sadly I knew it would resurface again.

However, the lessons alone did not come completely from attending these schools. It also came from the experiences I had outside of school when I boarded the bus and went to the Girl's Club. There I felt "smart" and my differences were not negative; they were admired. The girls, most of whom were African-American, assumed I was smart or smarter than they were simply because I attended a private school and spoke "properly." What they did not know was that I was treated as if I had mediocre intelligence during the day and superior intellect in the evenings. Nevertheless, I knew that something about this experience was not right.

Yet, in my innocence, I did not understand. I did not know what researchers are aware of today; I was unaware that African-American children were, and are still, achieving at rates far lower than any other racial minority group in this country. I also did not realize that there are major differences in the quality of education some students are afforded, and that money makes a big difference in the type of education one would receive. This is knowledge that I believe my teachers knew and accepted and thereby treated me accordingly.

This concept became even clearer as I left the privileged private school and entered public high school. Immediately I saw the difference in the overall experiences I received at the private school versus those in an urban public school. The facilities were outdated. Our tests scores never, or were barely ever, comparable to national standards.

There were never enough textbooks, and we never had current technology available to us. There was barely any parental involvement. My friends and I did not go on extravagant and memorable vacations, and for the first time I actually experienced violence in the schoolhouse. Needless to say, this had a profound effect on my life. Yet, it really became clear during a volunteer assignment I embarked upon during my senior year of high school.

It was during this time that I had a conversation with one of the students who attended a well-known private high school in Atlanta. She informed me that the entire junior class was taking Advance Placement Language Arts. Now, today I realize that this may not have been entirely true. However, I at least knew there was some merit to her statement. Yet, I was intelligent enough to realize that, though every one of those students may have indeed been in this class, it did not mean that these students were any smarter than I, nor the other students that attended my school. They just had more financial support, better or vaster experiences, and more stability. They had what we did not have in our urban school.

**Phenomenon of interest.** Once the disparities resonated within me, educational equality and opportunity for all children became one of my life's vocation. This notion was, and at times still seems, somewhat naïve. However, as time went on, my research introduced me to other African-American women who felt the same. These women were foremothers, the creators, and the soldiers for what Alice Walker coined *womanism*.

According to Walker, womanism is Black feminism.

The womanist loves self, other women, women's experiences, and the black community. In addition, she is both a particularist (concerned first and foremost about Black women, but other women as well!) and a universalist (focusing on the welfare and wholeness of all persons regardless of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc. (Burrow, 1998, para. 24).

I came across women like Isabella Baumfree, Dr. Anna Johnson Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Zora Neal Hurston, Barbara Sizemore, Dr. Jeanne L. Noble, Marian Wright Edelman, and Toni Morrison. These women embodied what it meant to be a practitioner of womanism: (a) naming and taking ownership of one's experiences; (b) the multiplicity of oppression, racism, and sexism; (c) the embracing of spirituality; (d) the understanding and acceptance of the responsibility one has towards the advancement of their community; and (e) the connection and concern for all humans regardless of race, class, gender, religion, or culture (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 2000; Comas-Diaz, 2008; Giles, 2006; & Hamlet, 2000; Ogunyemi, 1985; Weems, 1993).

I realized that my experience as an African-American woman had a name, a name as unique as the experiences themselves, womanism. The name was sacred to women, including me, who did not want someone who has never walked in their shoes to reproduce their history or to tell of their struggle. These women wanted to be the voice of their own story. As Dr. Cooper relayed, women “forcefully argued for the unmuting of Black women’s voice and the telling of their own stories so that everybody would know their precise status as told by them, and not by Black men or well-meaning Whites” (Burrow, 1998, para 3). Womanism meant being responsible, taking ownership over oneself while simultaneously being accountable for others, and realizing she is not separate from society, rather a needed and important facet in this world. Womanism defined the essence of my spirit and I gladly embraced it.

Subsequently, as I began my studies in educational leadership, womanism continued to speak to me. She was the silent voice behind the work that I was doing, and

I realized the connection between womanism and education. Like Phillips (2006) stated, the womanist frame is many times utilized by women of color without being actualized because it is not widely known, researched, or taught. Therefore, I was employing the framework without realizing it. As an educator, I was an activist and advocate for the rights of all children and especially for those underserved. In present day society, many of those underserved are the minority children of the country. “The practice of direct social activism and advocacy for the rights and uplift of Blacks in general and Black women in particular is a significant carryover to the present day womanist movement” (Burrow, 1998, para 9).

Consequently, today more than ever, African-American children are in need of educational advocates who believe that education is not solely for the purpose of system maintenance but also for social transformation (Cozart & Gordon, 2006). These advocates subscribe to what Cozart & Gordon (2006) called *womanist caring*. Womanist caring is characterized by women who embrace the maternal, meaning they willingly treat all of their students as if they were their own. Womanist caring requires political clarity and the realization that oppression is methodical and not an individual’s quest to act out of spite or forethought. Last, womanist caring is the commitment to confront unjust systems while realizing that change may not occur, yet having the fortitude to continue the fight (Cozart & Gordon, 2006).

Appendix B

Personal Interview Protocol and Questioning Format

**Research Topic:** Educating as a Vocation: A Phenomenological Study of Womanist Educational Leaders

This interview protocol is divided into three sections based on the research questions posed in the study: Section 1, Characteristics of Womanism and the Female Educational Leader; Section 2, Womanist characteristics, professional practices, and leadership styles; and Section 3, Womanism and Closing the Achievement Gap. Open-ended questions will be used in this interview process as a means of gathering data focused on the themes as expressed in the sections of this protocol. A total of three interviews, lasting approximately 2 hours, will be conducted and the questions from one of the aforementioned sections as well as a section on personal demographics will be used to guide each interview session.

**SECTION 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMANISM AND THE FEMALE EDUCATIONAL LEADER**

Data collected for Research Question 1, *What do the characteristics of womanism mean to African-American female educational leaders?*, will be reported specifically from responses to the questions below.

- We learn in the review of literature that the unique vantage point through which African-American women view the world is in fact an intersectionality of consciousnesses. Those multiple consciousnesses center racism, sexism, and classism. I want you to explain the experiences you have had with each level of discrimination, individually.
- Which experience or experiences with the various levels of discrimination are most significant to you and what did you learn from them?
- Describe a time where the various levels of discrimination (sexism, racism, and classism) have intersected.
- Explain how you handled the aforementioned and what happened as a result of the action or lack of action.
- There are those who argue that there is a disempowering aspect of being a person impacted by the intersectionality of multiple consciousnesses; however there are those who disagree. Taking these views under consideration, describe a time where you felt empowered or disempowered because of your multiple consciousnesses.
- Othermothering, though an older concept, is now, through research being connected to the African-American female educator as a means of relating to those under her care. Considering this is an older idea, describe how you been impacted by othermothers in your life?
- Thinking about motherwit, what words, advice, or lessons resonate most with you and how will you or have you continued the tradition of passing on this knowledge?
- For years, education for African-Americans has served as a way to escape oppression. It was a way to open those doors once closed. This is also the case for women and the

- struggle for equality. How have you witnessed the breaking of barriers in your experience as an educational leader?
- What areas, in the field of education, do you feel there are still barriers to be broken and what role do African-American women play in the dismantling?
  - What advice do you give to other African-American women in regards to breaking barriers?
  - What role does vision play in regards to breaking barriers?
  - When it comes to the African-American female experience, activism manifests itself in many ways. Describe your experience with activism.
  - What does activism mean to you?
  - There are those that argue there is a different definition of care for the womanist African-American female educator, than for other females in the field. What is your definition of care?
  - Explain how you developed this self-definition of care?
  - Describe the role of relationships in regards to the womanist ethic of care.
  - Describe the role of dialogue in regards to the womanist ethic of care.
  - How can other African-American female leaders benefit from looking at their practice through a womanist lens?

## **SECTION 2: WOMANIST CHARACTERISTICS, PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES, AND LEADERSHIP STYLES**

Data collected for Research Question 2, *What perceived role do womanist characteristics play in the professional practices and leadership styles of African-American female educational leaders?*, will be reported specifically from responses to the questions below.

- There are many elements of womanism. However, I would like to begin our interview with the focus on multiple consciousnesses. Can you identify the various lenses from which you view the world and discuss how these vantage points impact your leadership?
- Can you describe a time, if you did not mention it already, where you experienced an intersection of consciousnesses in the field of educational leadership? How did this experience influence your role as an educational leader?
- How did the power or lack thereof influence your role as an educational leadership?
- Now that you have shared how multiple consciousness and the intersectionality of these vantage points have played a role in your life, describe how these past experiences have impacted your experience as an educational leader in general.
- How does the role of othermothering influence your experience as an educational leader?
- The literature tells us that the motherline plays an important role in the lives of African-American women, especially those in leadership. How have those women,

- whether they are biological mothers, grandmothers, godmothers, aunts, or othermothers, influenced your life as an educational leader?
- Through the motherline, motherwit has been used to give African-American women and girls the information needed to survive and thrive in an atmosphere of oppression and subjugation. What are examples of those bits of wisdom passed on to you through the motherline and tell me how these words have influenced your experience as an educational leader.
  - Of the women mentioned, can you recall which one had the most prevalent impact on your professional journey and explain the significance of her influence?
  - Can you identify specific opportunities that you encountered and believe propelled you towards obtaining a leadership position(s)?
  - Can you identify specific barriers that you feel served as an obstruction you in your leadership role(s)?
  - Tell me about the strategies that you employed to overcome the obstacles you encountered in the event(s) you described earlier.
  - What did you learn about yourself in these moments?
  - Can you identify particular circumstances that started out as a barrier, however you were able to turn it into an opportunity? How did you do this?
  - How have the challenges and opportunities you have encountered in your leadership journey influenced your leadership style?
  - Can you recall times where you had to serve as an activist either for a child, teacher, or an initiative?
  - What did you learn about yourself in these moments?
  - How have these moments influenced you as an educational leader?
  - Can you recall and elaborate on a female educational activist who has had a significant impact on how you see your role as an educational leader?
  - Describe a time where an educator exhibited the womanist ethic of care towards you and how it influenced your role as an educational leader?
  - Explain how you exhibit care towards the students, teachers, staff, and co-administrators?
  - How was care used to promote your success?
  - Considering everything we have discussed, what is your educational leadership philosophy?
  - Which area of womanism has had the largest impact on your educational philosophy?
  - What vision do you have for your future as an educational leader? How do the elements of womanism fit into this picture?
  - How can other educators, regardless of race or gender, benefit from looking at their practice through a womanist lens?

### SECTION 3: WOMANISM AND CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Data collected for Research Question 3, *What role does womanism play in helping to close the achievement gap experienced by many African-American students?*, will be reported specifically from responses to the questions below.

- Based on your experiences, tell me how othermothering helps to promote academic achievement?
- Can you recall a time when othermothering or someone acting as an othermother, made a significant difference in the life of a child?
- Can you recall a time where a student or mentee benefited from your motherwit?
- The achievement gap is an area where many would argue there is an incessant barrier. What are your experiences with barriers being broken in this area?
- In the African-American community breaking barriers or transgressive education has been seen as a vehicle for freedom and advancement. How have your experiences with the breaking of barriers influenced the closing of the achievement gap in regards to the students under your leadership?
- What about the teachers, over which you serve, how can your experience with the breaking of barriers guide them in using transgressive education in order to close the achievement gap?
- What role does activism play in the efforts to eradicate the achievement gap?
- Describe a time when you enacted various levels of activism in order to aid in closing the achievement gap.
- What did you learn about yourself and the use of activism as a tool to aid in this fight?
- An aspect of activism centers on the myriad of networks of women who have gotten together to fight social ills, what are your experiences with similar networks? What role have they played in helping to close the achievement gap?
- How does care help to promote student success?
- How does care help to promote a positive school culture?
- How does care help to promote teacher success and growth?
- How can the womanist lens help to bring about the ultimate goal of academic achievement for all students?

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Hello. Thank you for taking time out of your day to meet with me and participate in this study. The information you provide will be very valuable and meaningful as I seek to answer questions that may connect the relationship between educational leadership, the womanist framework, and closing the achievement gap. You have been selected and asked to participate in the research because like many of the womanist foremothers and those thereafter, you identify yourself as a womanist and your educational leadership style exemplifies the characteristics of the womanist framework. Therefore, because what you have to say is so important to this study, I want you to feel comfortable and as relaxed as possible. If, at anytime during this process, you have any concerns, please let me know so that I can help you feel at ease.

In an effort to ensure the interview questions are clearly organized, I have arranged them based on the womanist themes appearing consistently in the literature: (a) women of color and multiple identities and intersectionality, (b) motherwit, the phenomena of othermothering, and the motherline, (c) educating to transgress, (d) activism, and (e) educational leadership. However, we will begin with personal demographic questions. The way they are listed below illustrates how they will be delivered during our face-to-face interviews. The interviews are scheduled to last approximately 2 hours. However, please keep in mind that many of the questions will require you to recall and relate possibly emotionally charged incidents which could require a great deal of time to describe. Therefore, additional time may be required to complete the interview sessions. If that happens, together, we will determine the best time, place, and method for completing the interview.

## **SECTION 1: PERSONAL DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

1. Using a timeline format, explain your career trajectory for me, describing your responsibilities in each role held.
2. Describe your experience at the varying stages in your career trajectory.
3. What career roles were most significant to you and what did you learn from them?
4. How did these experiences help you to ascend the educational leadership hierarchy?
5. Explain what you believe facilitated and/or impeded your success in each of these roles.

6. Describe an event(s) in your career trajectory that you would coin as your defining moment(s). This event may have been during leadership or prior to your leadership role(s).
7. How has this/these event(s) influenced your leadership style?
8. Describe your leadership style.
9. How did you acquire this style of leadership and why is it most effective in the world of education?

## **SECTION 2: WOMANISM AND MULTIPLE CONSCIOUSNESSES**

1. There are many elements of womanism. However, I would like to begin our interview with the focus on multiple consciousnesses. Can you identify the various lenses from which you view the world and discuss how these vantage points impact your leadership?
2. We learn in the review of literature that the unique vantage point through which African-American women view the world is in fact an intersectionality of consciousnesses. Those multiple consciousnesses center on racism, sexism, and classism. I want you to explain the experiences you have had with each level of discrimination, individually.
3. Which experience or experiences with the various levels of discrimination, that you just discussed, are most significant to you and what did you learn from them?
4. How have your experiences with the multiple levels of discrimination shaped your role as an educational leader?
5. Describe a time where the various levels of discrimination (sexism, racism, and classism) have intersected.
6. Explain how you handled the aforementioned and what happened as a result of the action or lack of action.
7. Can you describe a time, if you did not mention it already, where you experienced an intersection of consciousnesses in the field of educational leadership? How did this experience influence your role as an educational leader?
8. There are those who argue that there is a disempowering aspect of being a person impacted by the intersectionality of multiple consciousnesses; however there are those who disagree. Taking these views under consideration, describe a time where you felt empowered or disempowered because of your multiple consciousnesses.
9. How did the power or lack thereof influence your role as an educational leadership?

### **SECTION 3: WOMANISM: OTHERMOTHERING, MOTHERLINE, AND MOTHERWIT**

1. Othermothering, though an older concept, is now, through research being connected to the African-American female educator as a means of relating to those under her care. Considering this is an older idea, describe how you been impacted by othermothers in your life?
2. How does the role of othermothering influence your experience as an educational leader?
3. Based on your experiences, tell me how othermothering helps to promote the academic achievement of your students?
4. Can you recall a time when othermothering or someone acting as an othermother, made a significant difference in the life of a child?
5. The literature tells us that the motherline plays an important role in the lives of African-American women, especially those in leadership. How have those women, whether they are biological mothers, grandmothers, godmothers, aunts, or othermothers, influenced your life as an educational leader?
6. Of the women mentioned, can you recall which one had the most prevalent impact on your professional journey and explain the significance of her influence?
7. Through the motherline, motherwit has been used to give African-American women and girls the information needed to survive and thrive in an atmosphere of oppression and subjugation. What are examples of those bits of wisdom passed on to you through the motherline and tell me how these words have influenced your experience as an educational leader.
8. Thinking about motherwit, what words, advice, or lessons resonate most with you and how will you or have you continued the tradition of passing on this knowledge?
9. Can you recall a time where a student or mentee benefited from your motherwit?

### **SECTION 4: TRANSGRESSIVE EDUCATION**

1. For years, education for African-Americans has served as a way to escape oppression. It was a way to open those doors once closed. This is also the case for women and the struggle for equality. How have you witnessed the breaking of barriers in your experience as an educational leader?
2. Can you identify specific opportunities that you encountered and believe propelled you towards obtaining a leadership position(s)?
3. Can you identify specific barriers that you feel served as an obstruction you in your leadership role(s)?
4. Tell me about the strategies that you employed to overcome the obstacles you encountered in the event(s) you described earlier.

5. What did you learn about yourself in these moments?
6. Can you identify particular circumstances that started out as a barrier, however you were able to turn it into an opportunity? How did you do this?
7. How have the challenges and opportunities you have encountered in your leadership journey influenced your leadership style?
8. What areas, in the field of education, do you feel there are still barriers to be broken and what role do African-American women play in the dismantling?
9. What advice do you give to other African-American women in regards to breaking barriers?
10. What role does vision play in regards to breaking barriers?
11. The achievement gap is an area where many would argue there is an incessant barrier. What are your experiences with barriers being broken in this area?
12. In the African-American community breaking barriers or transgressive education has been seen as a vehicle for freedom and advancement. How have your experiences with the breaking of barriers influenced the closing of the achievement gap in regards to the students under your leadership?
13. What about the teachers, over which you serve, how can your experience with the breaking of barriers guide them in using transgressive education in order to close the achievement gap?

## **SECTION 5: WOMANISM AND ACTIVISM**

1. When it comes to the African-American female experience, activism manifests itself in many ways. Describe your experience with activism.
2. What does activism mean to you?
3. Can you recall times where you had to serve as an activist either for a child, teacher, or for an initiative?
4. What did you learn about yourself in these moments?
5. How have these moments influenced you as an educational leader?
6. Can you recall and elaborate on a female educational activist who has had a significant impact on how you see your role as an educational leader?
7. What role does activism play in the efforts to eradicate the achievement gap?
8. Describe a time when you enacted various levels of activism in order to aid in closing the achievement gap.
9. What did you learn about yourself and the use of activism as a tool to aid in this fight?

10. An aspect of activism centers on the myriad of networks of women who have gotten together to fight social ills, what are your experiences with similar networks? What role have they played in helping to close the achievement gap?

#### **SECTION 6: WOMANISM AND THE ETHIC OF CARE**

1. There are those that argue there is a different definition of care for the womanist African American female educator, than for other females in the field. What is your definition of care?
2. Explain how you developed this self-definition of care?
3. Describe a time where an educator exhibited the womanist ethic of care towards you and how it influenced your role as an educational leader?
4. Describe a defining moment where you exhibited the ethic of care and explain what made this experience significant.
5. Describe the role of relationship building in regards to care.
6. Describe the role of dialogue in regards to care.
7. Explain how you exhibit care towards the students, teachers, staff, and co-administrators?
8. How does care help to promote student success?
9. How does care help to promote a positive school culture?
10. How does care help to promote teacher success and growth?
11. How was care used to promote your success?

#### **SECTION 7: WOMANISM AND EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY**

1. Considering everything we have discussed, what is your educational leadership philosophy?
2. Which area of womanism has had the largest impact on your educational philosophy?
3. What vision do you have for your future as an educational leader? How do the elements of womanism fit into this picture?
4. How can other African-American female leaders benefit from looking at their practice through a womanist lens?
5. How can other educators, regardless of race or gender, benefit from looking at their practice through a womanist lens?
6. How can the womanist lens help to bring about the ultimate goal of academic achievement for all students?

(Thank the research participant for her cooperation and participation in this interview. Assure her of the confidentiality of her responses and the potential for future interviews)

## Appendix C

### Overall Study Themes

The left column lists the themes while the right column lists the accompanying recurring terms, words, and phrases.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Terms/words/phrases</b>
<b>A Mentor is a Must</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She taught me what it looked like.</li> <li>• She taught me to negotiate.</li> <li>• She took me through word problems.</li> <li>• The principal approached me about becoming a principal.</li> <li>• She saw my potential.</li> <li>• It was one of the most important relationships in my career.</li> <li>• The principal put me through every training available.</li> <li>• She took me under her wing.</li> <li>• I started mentoring.</li> <li>• She saw the potential and literally did everything to draw that out.</li> <li>• I had a mentor (a White male mentor).</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Second year I became 5th grade team leader.</li> <li>• I was a model for exemplary classroom instruction.</li> <li>• The district had me in the directory for exemplary teaching.</li> <li>• I started an organization for the African-American boys in my school.</li> <li>• I served as a panelist for symposiums at prestigious institutions.</li> <li>• My classroom was featured on a major television network news channel.</li> <li>• They call me Assata Shakur.</li> </ul>
<b>Activism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocating.</li> <li>• Speaking and teaching cultural relevance.</li> <li>• Fight the good fight.</li> <li>• I was an activist in the classroom.</li> <li>• Policy! I want to get into policy.</li> <li>• Nobody in educational policy looks like me but they make decisions that impact the lives of people like me.</li> <li>• Grassroots, before I knew what it was.</li> <li>• Fight for education.</li> <li>• Sign petitions.</li> </ul>
<b>Overcoming Stereotypes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncomfortable being looked at as a sexual object.</li> <li>• I am never alone with them or the door is opened.</li> <li>• I am labeled.</li> </ul>

- People assume I am not as smart.
- I had to learn the language.
- I speak like a Black person.
- People will tune me out.
- I don't identify with the negative connotations associated with being a single mother.
- Mad Black Woman syndrome.
- Subservient to Black male leadership.
- Taught we were as good as anybody.
- We weren't the ones with the problem; it was those with the hatred.

### **A Strong Sense of Self**

- I created that image for myself.
- I knew I was highly competent.
- I did not let my color or how they saw me determine my success.
- I am glad I am a Black female.
- I am always aware of my power.
- I have learned my power.
- I am a person of integrity.
- I don't jump on bandwagons.

### **A Vocation**

- A ministry.
- A calling.
- I was on a high.
- This is important for me to do.
- A greater passion for enlightening people.
- It was my passion.
- It felt so natural.

### **Breaking Barriers**

- I am a part of the group that disproportionately comes out on the crappy end of the deal, and I get to go in show them the correct information.
- Low performing to number one in the district.
- First school to wear uniforms.
- I am always the youngest and the only African-American—sometimes the only woman.
- First female president of the state school administrators' organization.
- Education is the only way out.

### **Care**

- You don't quit when you care.
- Having that manager that has tough conversations with me because they care.
- They were compassionate.
- I noticed these Black women who did not let us get lost or get away with anything.

**High Expectations**

- If they got on you it was because you were disrupting learning and they wanted you to be the best.
- I care about kids.
- I would take someone wet behind the ears who cared for kids, and train them.
- Care and belief.
  
- Once you get the taste of promotion, you want to always do your best.
- Rigor.
- Growth.
- Academic achievement,
- I go in with the intent to transform.
- Being exposed to real excellence.
- Always actively engaged with kids.