

Black Female Principals' Wellness and Survival while Leading Anti-Black Public Schools

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Abstract

Black women principals serve critical roles within public education while simultaneously navigating systems shaped by racism, sexism, and anti-Blackness. Despite growing scholarship on educational leadership, limited research has examined the health, wellness, and survival of Black female principals through an intersectional Black feminist lens (Collins, 1990, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989). Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with six Black female principals and a focus group consisting of three participants, representing elementary, middle, and high school leadership contexts and three to over twenty years of leadership experience. Data were analyzed using narrative inquiry methods to identify patterns, meanings, and shared experiences across participant stories.

Findings indicated that participants viewed leadership as a calling rooted in service, advocacy, and community responsibility while simultaneously navigating heightened scrutiny, emotional labor, systemic inequities, and significant wellness challenges. Participants described experiences of racialized gender fatigue, isolation, and burnout that affected their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. At the same time, faith, sisterhood, and collective care emerged as essential survival strategies that fostered resilience, healing, and sustainable leadership. The study further highlights the importance of culturally responsive support systems, collective care, and organizational practices that promote the sustainability and well-being of Black women leaders.

Keywords: Black women principals, educational leadership, Black Feminist Thought, intersectionality, wellness, anti-Blackness

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved family, whose unwavering support has been my guiding light throughout this journey. A special tribute goes to my children, Key'Shawn Elijah Mitchell and Ryan Lailani Jackson, whose laughter and joy inspire me every day. I strive to show them that with determination and perseverance, anything is possible, and I hope my accomplishments serve as a testament to that belief.

Additionally, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the remarkable Black women in educational leadership who have paved the way for me. Their strength and resilience have created pathways for future generations, and I am honored to stand on their shoulders. I am committed to continuing this legacy and to inspiring the young leaders who will follow in our footsteps.

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Black Female Principals' Wellness and Survival while Leading Anti-Black Public Schools

Public schooling in the United States is historically rooted in anti-Black structures that maintain racial hierarchy through policy, leadership norms, and accountability systems (Anderson, 2017; Dumas, 2016; Dumas & Ross, 2016). Within these systems, Black students, families, educators, and leaders are disproportionately surveilled, disciplined, and devalued, while whiteness continues to define professionalism, competence, and leadership legitimacy (Foster, 1997; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Tillman, 2004). Anti-Blackness—distinct from generalized racism—positions Blackness as inherently problematic or disposable, shaping not only student outcomes but also the working conditions and lived realities of Black educators and administrators (Love, 2019). For Black female principals, these conditions create schools that are not merely challenging workplaces but structurally hostile environments that demand constant negotiation of race, gender, and power.

This study centers on the personal and professional experiences of Black female principals in K–12 public schools, with particular attention to how they sustain their health and well-being while leading within systems not designed for their success or survival. Although women now constitute the majority of school principals nationally, Black women remain underrepresented in educational leadership and are disproportionately appointed to under-resourced, highly surveilled, and state-sanctioned “failing” schools (Jean-Marie, 2006; Knaus, 2014; Tillman, 2009). Leadership pathways are further constrained by exclusionary mentorship networks, racialized hiring practices, and dominant norms that privilege white, middle-class leadership styles (Brooks et al., 2007; Knaus, 2014). Even when appointed, Black women frequently assume expanded relational, emotional, and community-facing responsibilities—family engagement, student mentorship, crisis response, and instructional support—forms of

labor that are essential to school success yet often invisible or undervalued within managerial and test-based accountability metrics (Cheng, Coady, & Maranto, 2023).

These professional demands intersect with persistent stereotypes and controlling images that regulate how Black women leaders are expected to perform. Tropes such as the “angry Black woman,” the “mammy,” and the “strong Black woman” cast Black women as emotionally invulnerable, endlessly resilient, and responsible for others’ well-being (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Collins, 2022). These narratives are not new; they are historical constructions circulated through early film, popular media, and schooling practices that normalized distorted representations of Black womanhood (hooks, 1992; Au, 2009). In contemporary leadership contexts, these stereotypes shape judgments about professionalism, “fit,” and demeanor, creating a double bind in which assertiveness is read as aggression and collaboration as weakness (Crenshaw, 1989; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Weiner et al., 2022). The need to continually monitor tone, expression, and behavior produces what scholars describe as racialized gender fatigue or racial battle fatigue—a cumulative cognitive, emotional, and physiological toll associated with navigating intersecting racism and sexism (Ragland Woods et al., 2021).

Together, structural exclusion, intensified labor expectations, and racialized gender surveillance place Black female principals at elevated risk for stress-related health consequences. Research documents disproportionate experiences of occupational stress, burnout, and barriers to mental health care among Black women school leaders (Allen, 2019; Beard, 2018; Doan, Steiner, & Smith, 2022; Smith, 2021). Yet Black women also cultivate culturally grounded forms of care, spirituality, relationality, and collective resistance that sustain their leadership and communities (Bass, 2012; Dantley, 2005). Following Lorde’s (1984) assertion that self-care is a political act of self-preservation, wellness for Black women principals must be understood not as

an individual responsibility but as a survival strategy enacted within systems structured to exhaust them.

As a Black female principal, I have experienced firsthand the mental, emotional, and physical strain of navigating these intersecting pressures. My experiences reflect broader systemic barriers faced by Black women in educational leadership, including isolation, tokenization, the “concrete ceiling,” and the expectation to perform superhuman resilience while receiving limited institutional support (Chance, 2022; Knaus & Rogers-Ard, 2023). This study emerges from that lived reality and seeks to generate counternarratives that challenge deficit framings of Black women leaders while illuminating the structural conditions that shape their health and work.

Guided by Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990, 2022), this qualitative study centers Black women’s lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge and treats wellness as relational, political, and collective. Through in-depth individual and focus group interviews, the study explores how anti-Black leadership contexts shape Black female principals’ daily practices, how they understand health and well-being, and what strategies they employ to survive and lead effectively. The central guiding question for this study is: How do Black female principals navigate and sustain their health and well-being while leading in K–12 public schools characterized by anti-Blackness? By amplifying the voices of Black female principals, this research seeks to illuminate the structural conditions that shape their work, honor the labor and care they provide to their communities, and contribute to educational leadership scholarship that too often renders Black women’s leadership invisible.

Researcher Positionality

To ground this work in Black feminist approaches, I share my positionalities to provide context for my research with Black female leaders (Collins, 1990). I am strong, intelligent, caring, resilient, and most importantly, I am Me—Elizabeth Flavors. I was born on February 3, 1985, and raised in the Soufend¹ of Seattle, Washington—the same place where I currently work and once lived. This land, rich in history and culture, is a significant space for both the Suquamish People and the Black community. The Suquamish, an Indigenous tribe of the Pacific Northwest, have deep roots in this area, with traditions and histories spanning thousands of years. Their connection to the land is not just physical but spiritual, embodying stories of perseverance, resilience, and harmony with nature.

In parallel, this land also represents the history, labor, and aspirations of Black individuals who have contributed significantly to its development and culture. From the struggles faced during the era of enslavement to the ongoing fight for equality and justice, Black experiences in this region are woven into the fabric of the identity of the Black community. The dreams of Black individuals, our hopes for a better future, and our collective achievements are crucial components of the Soufend's broader narrative. Together, these histories highlight a shared journey of endurance and strength, underscoring the importance of honoring the diverse stories that shape our communities, past and present. Acknowledging the contributions and

¹ “Soufend” refers to the Southend of Seattle, WA. This spelling and pronunciation reflect how many of my childhood friends and I referred to the area, capturing a localized, community-based expression that conveys both place and cultural identity.

experiences of both the Suquamish People and Black community helps foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the land we occupy today.

Growing up, the Soufend was vibrant in countless ways, shaping my experiences and identity. I remember the sounds of laughter echoing as kids played outside without a worry, our voices mingling in the warm summer air. Neighbors knew one another, shared stories over backyard fences, and local shops were filled with the aromas of diverse cuisines, inviting everyone to explore flavors from around the world. The streets were alive with music; I could hear the beats of hip-hop, R&B, jazz, and gospel resonating from the nearby homes, each block creating its own unique soundtrack. Cultural celebrations were also a common sight—festivals showcasing art, dance, and food that represented our diverse backgrounds. I recall attending local events where everyone came together, regardless of their differences, to celebrate our shared heritage.

Throughout my primary and middle school years, I eagerly anticipated the old-school car shows that took place almost every month around Seward Park. Those vibrant events were a celebration of automotive history, with rows of classic cars gleaming under the sun. I can still vividly recall the exhilaration of cruising in my dad's sleek, cherry-red 300ZX, the warm breeze flowing through the open windows, carrying the nostalgic scents of gasoline and summer. Each ride felt like a bridge between the past and the present, as I absorbed the hum of engines and the laughter of families around me, intertwined with memories of carefree days and community. Each neighborhood gathering felt like a family reunion, complete with joyous celebrations and touching conversations about our histories and dreams for the future.

As I navigated my teenage years and transitioned into adulthood, I found a deep connection to community that anchored me in many ways. The familiarity of school, the warmth of my church, the excitement of cheerleading for Rainier Eagles Little League, the discipline of Steppers for Christ Drill team, and countless other community activities surrounded me, like shopping at Chubby and Tubby, hanging out at Rainer Community Center, and attending all the summer parades. These elements were not just pastimes; they were pillars of my identity as a Black girl living in a vibrant and diverse Black community, a backdrop of continuous Black-affirming spaces that also welcomed all.

At 19, after welcoming my son into the world, I began my academic journey at Washington State University. It was during this time that I discovered my passion for education. I felt a compelling desire to give back to the Soufend neighborhood that had nurtured me. With this goal in mind, I aspired to become an educator within my own community, where I could share in the rich cultural history and experiences that shaped us. My path was not, however, without its challenges. Despite being denied entry into WSU's elementary education program three times, I remained resilient. While facing additional trials of being a teen mother, I received unwavering support from my family, which empowered me to keep pushing forward. Each setback only fueled my determination to succeed, and ultimately, I achieved my dream of becoming a teacher, dedicating myself to enlightening both students and staff about the historical and cultural significance of the Soufend.

After four fulfilling years of teaching at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary and fostering a love of learning among my third-grade students, my principal encouraged me to pursue leadership opportunities. Recognizing the importance of continued growth, I returned to school to earn my master's degree. I graduated in June 2018 and, shortly thereafter, assumed the role of

assistant principal in July 2018. Through dedication and hard work, I was promoted to principal in 2023. I proudly continue to serve in the Soufend of Seattle, committed to uplifting and empowering the next generation in the community that has always been my home.

Despite the transformations brought about by gentrification—such as rising property values, shifting neighborhood demographics, and the displacement of longtime residents—the Soufend still feels like home. The schools I have worked at, both past and present, were once populated mainly by students of color. For instance, just ten years ago, my current school had a small percentage of white students, and based on a high enrollment of children from low-income families, was a Title I school on the verge of closure. As the neighborhood underwent gentrification, so did the school. Currently, the school I lead is 74% white. Despite being in the same predominantly Black neighborhood I grew up in, the Black families I knew have largely been displaced. The district is considering designating the school as a highly capable (HC) school, which would further segregate advanced students receiving accelerated instruction from those who either opted out of the screening or were not identified by the district's standardized formula as HC. This decision would leave underrepresented students, students receiving special education, and new arrivals to the country with what the district calls standard instruction, furthering the impact of gentrification by excluding many of the remaining families of color through substantially less resourced school options.

Within this community context, the schoolhouse is where I spend over 50 hours each week. I genuinely want to be there, yet there are moments when I question how much longer I can serve in a space that was not designed for me. Being a principal is both rewarding and taxing on my physical health, overall well-being, and spirit. Witnessing students smile and seeing them show up eager to learn each day is a remarkable reward. However, being yelled at by parents,

constantly grappling with new directives from the district, and navigating staff shortages can weigh heavily on my ability to lead and be present for our beautiful school community. The burden I carry drives me to reflect on whether this weight is heavier because I am a principal, or if it is more pronounced because I am a Black female principal leading a space that was not created for someone like me.

Even as my surroundings change, I remain firmly grounded in the invaluable lessons I've learned and the meaningful relationships I've built within these vibrant spaces. I cherish the strength and richness that diversity brings to my life. My lively community has been more than just a backdrop; it has been a crucial part of my identity, shaping who I am even as that community has been displaced. Through my journey, I've come to truly value resilience, recognize the strength of community, and take pride in embracing our cultural heritage. As a daughter, mother, and educational leader, my life is filled with love, excitement, hope, fear, confusion, and numerous demands. Every interaction and connection creates a rich tapestry of support and understanding, showcasing the beauty of our differences and fostering a sense of belonging that I carry with me wherever I go. As a Black female principal, part of my reciprocity lies in making the path easier for the next generation, which underscores the need for a theoretical framework that centers the intersecting realities of race, gender, leadership, and well-being, positioning Black Feminist Thought as a critical lens for this study.

Black Feminist Thought

Patricia Hill Collins is a highly influential American sociologist, Black Feminist Theorist, and public intellectual. Her work bridges academic theory and everyday lived experiences, especially those of Black women. She is widely recognized for her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), which has become foundational in sociology, gender studies, and critical race theory. Black Feminist Thought outlines four tenets that constitute a theoretical framework and a tradition of knowledge produced by Black women (Collins, 1990), three of which this study intentionally engages based on alignment with the research. The framework centers Black women's experiences as a legitimate and vital source of knowledge about society, power, and oppression, and serves as the foundation for this dissertation.

The first tenet emphasizes lived experience as a key criterion for meaning. Collins states, "Being a Black woman in the U.S. necessitates wisdom, as understanding the complexities of intersecting oppressions has been crucial for their survival" (Collins, 2022, p. 326). Collins delves deeper into the idea of intersecting oppressions by examining how various systems of power combine to create distinct social realities for Black women. She argues that race, gender, and class are not merely additive factors but are interwoven in ways that the impact of one cannot be fully understood without considering the others (Collins, 1990). For instance, Black women's experiences cannot be understood fully through the lens of race or gender in isolation; instead, it is essential to consider how class interacts with racial and gender identity to shape lived experience. This framework, known as intersectionality, reveals the complexities of social identities and illustrates how societal structures simultaneously produce and reinforce different forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). This intersectional analysis is critical for understanding

the systemic inequalities and social injustices that Black women face (Collins, 1990) and is particularly helpful for framing the experiences of Black women school leaders (Reed, 2014).

Furthermore, Collins (1990) challenges the notion that formal education is the singular or superior form of knowledge. She critiques the traditional academic framework that often privileges certain forms of knowledge—specifically that codified in formal educational settings—while dismissing other forms of understanding arising from lived experience. For Black women, everyday experiences, struggles, and resilience provide a profound, contextual form of wisdom that formal education often overlooks while simultaneously devaluing (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981). This form of experiential knowledge not only equips Black women to navigate oppressive systems but also empowers Black women to challenge and transform these systems from within. By advocating for the recognition of lived experiences as a legitimate source of knowledge, Collins invites a broader, more inclusive understanding of what constitutes knowledge, echoing Audre Lorde (Collins, 1990). Experiential knowledge encourages the academic world and society at large to acknowledge the validity of insights derived from personal narratives and communal histories, recognizing that Black women's experiential knowledge is a critical perspective that enriches our understanding of social phenomena (Collins, 2022).

The second tenet underscores the essential function of conversation and discourse within Black communities (Collins, 2022). Collins' emphasis on dialogue is not merely a contemporary phenomenon; it is deeply rooted in African oral traditions that have historically influenced the social and cultural dynamics of African American life. Oral traditions serve as a means of cultural transmission, providing a framework for sharing history, values, and collective experiences that shape community identity and community knowledge (hooks, 2015). In Black

communities, dialogue continues to serve an essential role that goes beyond simple communication. It serves as a crucial means of affirmation and validation among Black individuals, fostering connection and understanding within the community. For enslaved African Americans, collective storytelling served as a crucial mechanism for articulating shared experiences and fostering group cohesion. Collins (2022) argues that these narratives serve both as a means of resistance against oppression and as a means of reinforcing individual and collective identities amid systemic dehumanization. This practice of storytelling enabled enslaved individuals to preserve their heritage and assert their humanity, even under brutal conditions (Butler, 1979).

The importance of dialogue within Black communities is further highlighted by modern cultural and intellectual figures, whose work shows how oral, lyrical, and performative exchanges serve as spaces for meaning-making and collective affirmation. Lauryn Hill's artistry, especially in *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, illustrates storytelling, lyricism, and reflective dialogue to express shared Black experiences, critique oppression, and build communal consciousness (Hill, 1998). Scholarly analysis sees Hill's work as a form of Black feminist rhetorical practice, in which dialogue functions not just as expression but also as a tool for teaching and politics that support holistic Black identity and interdependence (Sankofa Waters et al., 2018; McGee et al., 2019). Similarly, Beyoncé's visual and musical projects—most notably *Homecoming*—are viewed as broad forms of cultural dialogue that draw on Black oral traditions, call-and-response formats, and collective memory (Beyoncé, 2019). Through these performances, Beyoncé involves audiences in an intergenerational conversation that highlights Black history, celebrates resilience, and strengthens shared cultural knowledge (Trier-Bieniek, 2016). Extending these cultural expressions into academic study, Sankofa Waters (2016) stresses

dialogue and storytelling as core to Black communal life, especially in family and educational settings. Her work shows how storytelling and spoken exchanges act as ways to preserve cultural memory, claim agency, and build resilience against structural inequalities. Overall, these contributions highlight dialogue as a vital force in Black communities—linking artistic expression, lived experiences, and scholarly insights to promote solidarity and collective survival.

Collins' (2022) third foundational principle emphasizes the profound importance of three interrelated caring-centric components: uniqueness, emotion, and empathy, all of which are deeply rooted in African philosophies and traditions. Collins (2022) highlights that recognizing and honoring each person's individual uniqueness enhances the quality of our interactions and is an ethical obligation. This understanding encompasses the distinct backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that each participant contributes to the dialogue.

Emotion serves as connective tissue that binds individuals together within any relational context (Collins, 2022). In African American communities, emotional expression is not only permitted but encouraged, fostering a communal spirit that strengthens bonds. Audre Lorde and bell hooks highlight how society often misinterprets or invalidates Black women's emotions within the context of race and gender. Lorde (1984) asserts that Black women's anger is a legitimate response to oppression and can serve as a powerful tool for activism and communal healing. Similarly, hooks (1992) emphasizes reclaiming emotional experiences as a source of strength rather than weakness. Yet societal stereotypes—particularly the “angry Black woman”—can complicate this expression, portraying Black women as overly emotional or aggressive and undermining authentic emotional connection (Motro et al., 2022). By fostering open emotional expression and challenging these stereotypes, researchers and educators can

create space for participants, children, and families to share experiences in ways that resonate deeply, build trust, and promote mutual understanding. Embracing emotions in this way nurtures deeper connections and supports healing within communities.

Empathy is the third cornerstone of this ethical framework, requiring active, compassionate engagement in which one seeks to understand and experience others' emotions (Collins, 2022). This empathetic stance is vital for building genuine connections that bridge gaps between different viewpoints and life stories, highlighting interconnectedness and community support. By learning and integrating components of care into educational settings, one can foster an environment that promotes meaningful dialogue and enhances the overall learning experience. This approach encourages educators and educational leaders to prioritize students' emotional and social well-being, recognizing that a supportive atmosphere is essential for effective learning (McLellan, 2020).

In schools, Black feminist approaches create spaces where the nuances of communication—both verbal and non-verbal—are valued. Every interaction, tone, and gesture holds significance, contributing to a deeper understanding between educators and students. Caring in education involves not only academic support but also acknowledging students' emotional needs and fostering an environment where they feel understood and respected (Noddings, 2013). For educators, this integration encourages empathy, enhances student engagement, and builds trust, allowing for more impactful teaching and learning (Eisenberg et al., 2019). For educational leaders, it emphasizes the importance of cultivating a culture of care that not only supports academic success but also fosters a sense of belonging and community within the school (Fisher & Frey, 2021). Ultimately, by embedding care into the educational

experience, educators create a more dynamic and responsive learning environment that benefits everyone involved.

Incorporating Black Feminist Thought as my theoretical framework profoundly enriches my research on the health and well-being of Black female principals leading in anti-Black K-12 public schools. This framework emphasizes the intersection of race, gender, and class, enabling a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges these leaders face. A Black feminist-informed qualitative approach grounded in relationality, care, and lived experience not only validates participants' experiences but also fosters community engagement and solidarity. These interviews are designed to uncover strategies for personal and collective well-being, centering the lived experiences of Black women in educational leadership. Before clarifying the methods that shape these dialogic interviews, I highlight literature that situates Black female principals within the broader context of intersectional racism and well-being.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the interconnected bodies of scholarship that shape understandings of Black female principals' health, wellness, and survival as they lead within anti-Black public school systems. Grounded in Collins's Black Feminist Thought (1990, 2022), the review centers Black women's lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge and reframes wellness not as an individual responsibility but as a political, relational, and resistant practice within systems of racialized and gendered oppression. In contrast, traditional educational leadership research has largely favored race-neutral and gender-neutral conceptions of leadership and well-being, obscuring how leadership is experienced at the intersections of race and gender and rendering the realities of Black female principals invisible or misunderstood

(Tillman, 2004, 2009). Consequently, the emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual consequences of leading within anti-Black institutional contexts remain underexamined despite their profound implications for leadership sustainability.

To address these gaps, this review is organized into two interconnected sections. The first section situates these practices within the broader context of anti-Blackness in public school leadership, examining how structural racism, gendered surveillance, and accountability regimes shape the working conditions, expectations, and constraints that Black female principals must navigate. The second conceptualizes health, survival, and wellness as overlapping and mutually reinforcing dimensions through which Black women principals endure, restore, and resist the cumulative effects of structural stress. Drawing on intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought, this section synthesizes scholarship on embodied health risks, culturally grounded practices of care and restoration, and relational and strategic forms of survival that sustain leadership within inequitable systems (see Figure 1). Together, these strands of research demonstrate that Black women's leadership sustainability cannot be understood apart from the systemic conditions that necessitate both wellness and survival strategies and underscore the urgent need to amplify Black female principals' voices within educational leadership scholarship.

Anti-Blackness in the Context of Black Women Principals

Public schooling in the United States is historically rooted in anti-Black structures that maintain racial hierarchy through policy, leadership norms, disciplinary regimes, and accountability systems (Anderson, 2017; Dumas, 2016). Anti-Blackness functions as a structural and ideological condition that positions Blackness itself as inherently problematic, threatening, or disposable, shaping how Black students, families, educators, and leaders are perceived,

governed, and devalued within educational institutions (Dumas & Ross, 2016; Love, 2019). Rather than operating only through individual prejudice, anti-Blackness is embedded in the everyday logics of schooling: whose knowledge counts, whose leadership is trusted, whose behavior is policed, and whose labor is rendered invisible.

Within these systems, Black communities experience chronic divestment and heightened surveillance, while Black educators' professional knowledge is routinely questioned or marginalized (Foster, 1997; Milner, 2012). Educational leadership scholarship has long documented that Black principals often work in the most under-resourced and politically constrained contexts, where they are expected to remediate structural inequities without receiving commensurate support (Tillman, 2004, 2009). These inequities are particularly pronounced for Black women, whose pathways into leadership are shaped by intersecting racialized and gendered barriers that limit access to mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership development opportunities (Jean-Marie, 2006; Knaus, 2014; Redd, 2014; Williams, 2017).

A growing body of research in Black educational leadership argues that these patterns reflect systemic exclusion rather than individual deficits. Black women's leadership is frequently evaluated against white, middle-class norms of authority, communication, and professionalism, resulting in heightened scrutiny around demeanor, "fit," and relational style (Jean-Marie, 2006; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Rogers-Ard and Knaus (2021) describe these processes as forms of institutional silencing that narrow leadership trajectories and constrain authenticity, requiring Black leaders to constantly negotiate respectability, competence, and community accountability within organizations not designed for their success. Historical analyses further remind that Black women have always led schools and communities—particularly in segregated

or underfunded contexts—yet their contributions have been marginalized within dominant leadership canons (Casey, 2015; Tillman, 2004).

At the same time, this literature underscores that Black women principals often enact culturally grounded, relational, and justice-oriented leadership—centering care, advocacy, and community responsiveness as core practices rather than peripheral tasks (Bass, 2012; Dantley, 2005; Khalifa et al., 2016). While these approaches are critical to student and community well-being, they are frequently undervalued within accountability systems that prioritize managerial efficiency and test-based outcomes (Au, 2009). Consequently, Black women leaders must shoulder expanded emotional and relational labor while navigating intensified scrutiny and limited institutional support.

These dynamics create a professional terrain in which Black women principals are simultaneously hypervisible and undervalued—called upon to stabilize struggling schools yet denied the structural conditions necessary to thrive. The cumulative strain of leading within anti-Black institutions while buffering students, families, and staff from those same harms produces layered emotional, cognitive, and physiological demands that exceed typical occupational stress. Thus, survival and wellness for Black women principals cannot be framed as an individual matter of self-care or resilience alone; care must be understood as a structural issue arising from racialized leadership inequities that require continual adaptation, resistance, and survival.

Stereotypes and Controlling Images

Anti-Blackness in educational leadership frequently operates through enduring stereotypes and controlling images that regulate how Black women principals are expected to perform and be perceived. Black feminist scholars conceptualize these images as ideological

tools that normalize Black women's exploitation while simultaneously constraining their legitimacy and authority (Collins, 2022). Scholars argue that stereotypical tropes—including the “angry Black woman,” the “mammy,” and the “strong Black woman”—function as cultural impositions that define Black women's emotionality and social labor in ways that deny vulnerability and foreground caretaking expectations (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Collins, 2000; West, 1995). Rather than neutral descriptors, these caricatures are discursive tools of power that shape how Black women are perceived and treated within institutional, interpersonal, and cultural spaces, often positioning them as emotionally resilient yet burdened with the labor of others' well-being (Davis, 1983; Roberts, 1997). These representational regimes have deep historical roots, circulating through nineteenth- and twentieth-century media, literature, and educational discourses that naturalized Black women's subservience, hypervisibility, or erasure, and continue to inform policies and practices that constrain Black women's agency and health (hooks, 1992; Collins, 2000; Au, 2009). As such, controlling images operate not only at the level of culture but also as institutional logics embedded in the knowledge systems, policies, and practices that structure schooling.

Within educational organizations, these narratives shape hiring, evaluation, and promotion practices in ways that privilege subjective assessments and cultural conformity over transparent criteria and demonstrated expertise, contributing to environments that feel isolating or exclusionary for Black women leaders (Harrison & Wells, 2025). Leadership credibility thus becomes contingent upon performing a narrow range of behaviors aligned with white, middle-class norms of femininity and professionalism, rendering Black women both hypervisible and hyper-scrutinized in their roles and often trapped in a leadership double bind, in which behaviors rewarded in others are criticized when enacted by Black women (Cole, 1999;

Crenshaw, 1989; Harrison & Wells, 2025). These dynamics produce a persistent double bind, in which assertiveness or directness—traits often rewarded in white or male leaders—may be read as aggression or hostility when enacted by Black women, while collaborative or care-centered approaches are dismissed as weakness or a lack of authority (Cole, 1999; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Weiner et al., 2022). Consequently, Black female leaders must continually calibrate their tone, emotional expression, and self-presentation to avoid negative stereotyping while still meeting institutional expectations.

This constant self-monitoring constitutes significant cognitive and affective labor that extends beyond typical professional demands. The ongoing need to anticipate bias, manage others' perceptions, and regulate emotional expression imposes a cumulative psychological and physiological burden. These pressures are further compounded by broader cultural narratives that render Black educators largely invisible in the public imagination. Media and television representations of schooling have historically centered white protagonists—often positioning white women as moral saviors of Black and Brown children—while marginalizing or caricaturing Black educators and leaders, reinforcing whose leadership is seen as legitimate or authoritative (hooks, 1992; Gray, 1995; Warner, 2015).

Even contemporary media representations that increase the visibility of Black educators risk leaning on simplified or exaggerated characterizations rather than fully capturing the complexity of Black women's professional and emotional worlds. For instance, the popular sitcom *Abbott Elementary* centers on teachers and administrators in a predominantly Black public school and has been celebrated for its depiction of diverse teaching experiences and the everyday challenges educators face (Sparks, 2024). At the same time, discussions around the show's leadership characters—such as creator Quinta Brunson's acknowledgment that Black

women audiences have critiqued how Janine Teagues is portrayed—underscore the tension between visibility and representation expectations, especially given the scarcity of Black women in leading media roles (Powell & Seaton, 2025). Media analyses also note that while *Abbott Elementary* foregrounds Black educators and disrupts some traditional “white savior” tropes, it still relies on familiar sitcom archetypes and humor that can flatten complex systemic challenges into individual character quirks rather than structural critique (Jones & Some, 2024). These representational tensions reflect broader patterns in media where increased visibility does not automatically translate into nuanced depiction.

These organizational and representational pressures contribute to what scholars describe as racialized gender fatigue—a chronic psychological and physiological toll produced by navigating intersecting racial and gender inequities across both institutional and cultural contexts (Ragland Woods, Chronister, Perez Grabow, Woods, & Woodlee, 2021). Over time, these cumulative demands shape not only how Black women lead but also struggle with well-being, sustainability, and long-term health within the profession.

Historical and Contemporary Disparities in Representation

These contemporary pressures are rooted in longstanding structural inequities in leadership representation. Black women have historically been excluded from principalship roles, comprising less than 5% of principals during the desegregation era and often serving primarily in segregated schools within Black communities (Lomotey, 1989; Tillman, 2004). Although women now constitute the majority of U.S. principals overall, Black women remain underrepresented in school leadership and are disproportionately appointed to urban, under-resourced, or state-designated “failing” schools—contexts marked by intensified accountability

pressures, heightened surveillance, and limited institutional support (Jean-Marie, 2006; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Weiner et al., 2022; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). These patterns reflect not simply differential placement but racialized and gendered sorting processes that concentrate Black women in the most demanding educational environments while limiting access to more resourced or prestigious roles.

Importantly, this underrepresentation is not merely a pipeline problem but the product of exclusionary leadership development and selection processes that systematically constrain Black women's advancement. Black educators are frequently overlooked for mentorship, sponsorship, and professional grooming opportunities, while dominant conceptions of leadership potential privilege white, middle-class norms of demeanor, communication, and authority (Knaus, 2014). Such gatekeeping practices shape who is seen as "ready" to lead and narrow leadership trajectories long before formal hiring decisions occur. As Jean-Marie (2006) and Tillman (2004) note, Black women leaders often must exceed formal qualifications to receive consideration, navigating racialized and gendered stereotypes that question both their competence and legitimacy.

Even when appointed, Black female principals often assume expanded relational and community-facing responsibilities, devoting substantial time to family engagement, student mentorship, staff support, and instructional or curriculum guidance. While critical to school success and particularly vital in historically marginalized communities, this care-centered and culturally responsive labor is frequently rendered invisible or undervalued within traditional leadership evaluation systems that prioritize managerial efficiency, compliance, or test-based outcomes (Cheng, Coady, & Maranto, 2023). Black feminist and culturally responsive leadership scholars argue that this disproportionate expectation to provide emotional, relational, and

advocacy labor constitutes a form of gendered and racialized service work embedded within the role itself (Khalifa et al., 2016; Lomotey, 1989). Consequently, Black female principals often operate under intensified demands with fewer institutional resources or recognition, reinforcing inequities in both working conditions and professional valuation.

These dynamics at the school level also shape representation across the broader leadership hierarchy. Because access to advancement depends heavily on visibility, sponsorship, and alignment with dominant leadership norms, the same structural barriers that marginalize Black women in principalship constrain movement into district-level roles and the superintendency. Despite women's overall presence in the educator workforce, women—and especially Black women—remain markedly underrepresented among superintendents, reflecting persistent racialized and gendered bottlenecks in promotion pathways (Björk, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014; Superville, 2023). Studies of Black women aspiring to or serving in district leadership describe exclusion from informal networks, heightened scrutiny, and the need to demonstrate exceptional performance to counter deficit perceptions, all of which limit access to the highest levels of decision-making authority (Jean-Marie, 2006; Tillman, 2004).

Considered collectively, these historical exclusions, inequitable placements, and constrained opportunities for advancement illustrate that disparities in representation are systemic rather than incidental. Black women's leadership is shaped not only by where they are asked to serve and what labor they are expected to perform, but also by persistent barriers to recognition, mobility, and power. The result is a leadership pipeline that simultaneously intensifies demands at the school level and restricts access to the most influential positions in educational governance, thereby reproducing inequities in voice, authority, and professional sustainability across the profession.

Emotional Labor and Urban School Contexts

Urban school settings intensify these inequities. Chronic underfunding, insufficient staffing, and high-stakes accountability policies create school environments characterized by scarcity, constant pressure, and heightened scrutiny (Lipman, 2011; Milner, 2012; Milner & Lomotey, 2021). These structural constraints are compounded by accountability mandates—such as standardized testing, turnaround policies, and performance labeling—which simultaneously cast Black female principals as agents of reform and as scapegoats for systemic failures (Lipman, 2011; Smith, 2022). In effect, Black women leaders are positioned in roles that require them to absorb institutional shortcomings while being held personally responsible for outcomes shaped by structural inequities, thereby amplifying the emotional and professional burdens of leadership (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Collins, 2022). Within these contexts, Black female principals are expected to serve in multiple intersecting roles—as instructional leaders, crisis managers, cultural mediators, and community advocates—requiring the simultaneous management of organizational demands, relational expectations, and community needs (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016).

This expanded scope of responsibility produces a form of emotional labor that is qualitatively distinct from that of many white or male principals (Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2021). Because their authority and competence are continually filtered through racialized and gendered assumptions, Black female principals must carefully regulate emotional expression while providing care, stability, and advocacy for students, staff, and families (Ispa-Landa & Thomas, 2019; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Over time, these intersecting demands produce chronic stress and fatigue that exceed typical occupational strain, reflecting the compounded effects of systemic racism, sexism, and leadership expectations (Lorde, 1988; hooks, 1994; Collins, 2022).

Collins (2022) situates these pressures within the matrix of domination, illustrating how Black women navigate overlapping systems of oppression that shape professional experience, emotional labor, and long-term well-being.

Other Black feminist scholars further emphasize the cultural and emotional toll of these conditions. Collins (2022), Lorde (1988), and hooks (1994) highlight that Black women leaders must continually navigate visibility, credibility, and care responsibilities in environments that demand endurance without structural support. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) specifically documents the heightened surveillance, emotional exhaustion, and isolation experienced by Black female principals, demonstrating that these pressures are systemic rather than individual failings. By framing emotional labor through this Black feminist lens, it becomes clear that the strain experienced by Black female principals in urban school contexts is structurally embedded, rather than a reflection of personal inadequacy. Recognizing these dynamics underscores the necessity of intentional wellness and resistance strategies, both as mechanisms for sustaining leadership and as acts of empowerment against institutionalized oppression.

Health, Survival, and Wellness of Black Women Educational Leaders

Health Impacts

Traditional leadership frameworks often assume race-neutral, gender-neutral, and individualistic approaches, framing health and resilience as matters of personal responsibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Bass, 2012). These perspectives emphasize coping strategies, grit, and work–life balance while obscuring structural sources of stress, including organizational racism, sexism, and institutional inequities that shape both working conditions and access to care (Doan et al., 2022; Ricks, 2018). For Black women leaders—particularly principals navigating

hierarchically rigid and racially stratified school systems—cumulative stress emerges from racialized surveillance, disproportionate emotional labor, role overload, and inequitable accountability, with direct consequences for physical, emotional, and mental health (Tillman, 2004, 2009).

Beyond the workplace, Black women experience persistent health disparities and disparities in access to health and mental health care that reflect the systemic accumulation of disadvantage across the life course. Black women have higher rates of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and stress-related illness than their white counterparts, disparities that persist even after controlling for socioeconomic status (Geronimus et al., 2006; Allen, 2019). Research on “weathering” demonstrates how chronic exposure to racism accelerates biological aging and increases allostatic load, resulting in earlier onset of stress-related disease (Geronimus et al., 2006). Simultaneously, Black women face barriers to culturally responsive health and mental health care, including provider bias, mistrust of medical systems rooted in historical and contemporary harms, underdiagnosis of mental health concerns, and limited access to supportive services (Ward et al., 2019; Taylor & Hardison, 2023). These inequities contribute to lower utilization of mental health supports despite high levels of distress, reinforcing a pattern in which Black women are expected to endure rather than be cared for.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) illuminates how race, gender, and leadership status converge to produce unique vulnerabilities for Black women principals. In leadership roles, Black women are often subjected to heightened scrutiny, racialized expectations of discipline and care, constrained decision-making authority, and limited institutional protection when conflict or harm occurs (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Nash, 2019; Ijames, 2022). These conditions intensify stress and emotional exhaustion, particularly in under-resourced or high-

need schools, where Black women leaders are frequently positioned as crisis managers without commensurate authority or support (Smith, 2021; Steiner et al., 2022). Over time, this chronic exposure compounds pre-existing health inequities, increasing vulnerability to burnout, depression, cardiovascular disease, and other stress-related outcomes (Ricks, 2018).

Historical trauma further shapes these health outcomes. DeGruy (2005) defines historical trauma as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounds transmitted across generations as a result of slavery, segregation, and ongoing systemic racism. Black women principals lead while carrying both this intergenerational burden and the daily realities of racialized leadership, underscoring the need to situate health risks within structural, historical, and cultural contexts rather than individual deficit frameworks. Importantly, the consequences of racially toxic leadership environments are not abstract. Recent cases in higher education, including the death of Black women administrators following prolonged workplace harassment, isolation, and institutional neglect, have drawn national attention to the severe toll such environments can take on Black women's mental and physical health (Thomas, 2023). These tragedies reinforce that leadership in racially hostile systems can produce not only professional harm, but profound and irreversible health consequences.

In summary, the literature demonstrates that the health impacts experienced by Black women principals are the result of interlocking systems of oppression—racism, sexism, leadership inequities, and unequal access to care—that accumulate over time. Understanding these impacts requires moving beyond individual resilience narratives toward an examination of how institutions produce and sustain conditions that jeopardize Black women's health while simultaneously relying on their labor and leadership.

Survival

While wellness emphasizes restoration, survival centers on the strategic actions Black female principals take to navigate and transform inequitable professional environments. Survival encompasses deliberate practices that protect physical, emotional, and professional well-being while sustaining justice-oriented leadership within hostile or resource-constrained contexts (Collins, 2022; Love, 2019; Darrisaw, 2025; Ijames, 2022). Rather than simple endurance, survival reflects calculated decision-making, boundary-setting, and resistance to conditions that threaten leaders' longevity.

These strategies operate across relational, cultural, and structural dimensions. Relationally, Black female principals cultivate mentorship, sister circles, and peer networks that serve as counterspaces for affirmation, storytelling, and collective problem-solving (Beard, 2018; Bass, 2012; Brock, 2019; Evans-Winters, 2019). Such networks buffer isolation and provide shared knowledge for navigating racialized and gendered expectations. Structurally, Black female principals engage in selective advocacy, negotiate institutional constraints, and pursue equitable resources to safeguard both their communities and themselves (Evans-Winters & Love, 2015; Smith, 2022). These actions reflect pragmatic forms of resistance that enable Black female principals to persist without sacrificing their values or well-being.

Cultural grounding and spirituality also inform survival, not solely as a form of restoration but also as sources of strength and resolve that sustain Black female principals under high-stakes accountability pressures and anti-Black bias (Casey, 2015; Brooks et al., 2007; Dantley, 2005). Emerging scholarship increasingly frames these practices as strategic resistance rather than individual resilience. Despite occupying only 6–7% of U.S. principal positions, Black

female principals often lead underserved schools through relational, community-centered, and justice-oriented approaches that directly challenge inequitable systems (Cheng, Coady, & Maranto, 2023; Darrisaw, 2025). Phenomenological research during the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened racial injustice further demonstrates that survival is closely tied to advocacy for students and communities despite systemic neglect (Smith & Johnson, 2023). All things considered, survival represents the outward, action-oriented dimension of leadership sustainability—how Black female principals navigate and push back against institutional constraints to continue leading effectively and equitably.

Wellness

Wellness extends beyond the absence of illness to encompass emotional, psychological, relational, and cultural dimensions of well-being (Bryant, 2020; Casey, 2015). Within Black Feminist Thought, wellness is both restorative and oppositional, positioning self-definition and self-valuation as acts of resistance against controlling images that portray Black women as hyper-competent, self-sacrificing, and emotionally invulnerable (Collins, 2022; Harris-Perry, 2011). Practices such as rest, boundary-setting, and collective care therefore function not only to replenish energy but also to refuse institutional norms that depend on the overwork, silence, and disposability of Black women's labor (Lorde, 1988; hooks, 1994; Cooper, 2018).

Building on this framing, scholars emphasize that Black women's wellness strategies constitute intentional political resistance rather than individual self-improvement. Love (2019) and Brock (2021) argue that choosing rest, joy, and self-preservation directly disrupts systems organized around racial capitalism and patriarchal extraction, in which Black women's endurance is normalized and expected. Waters (2016) highlights how Black women's epistemic

strategies and self-articulations function to reclaim voice, agency, and care practices in spaces that often devalue their labor and presence. Similarly, Boylorn (2013) frames self-care, storytelling, and emotional honesty as emancipatory practices through which Black women assert agency over their lived experiences and reject narratives that conflate leadership with self-erasure. In leadership contexts, these wellness practices resist the expectation that Black women principals must absorb harm silently or perform invulnerability to maintain legitimacy. Instead, wellness becomes a praxis of boundary-making, truth-telling, and self-preservation that affirms Black women's humanity within racially and gendered oppressive systems.

Cultural grounding and spirituality play a central role in sustaining this resistance-oriented wellness. Black female principals often draw on faith, ancestral knowledge, and culturally rooted practices—including prayer, meditation, music, and intentional rest—to mitigate stress and sustain holistic health (Casey, 2015; Brooks et al., 2007; Dantley, 2005). These practices nurture the whole self—mind, body, and spirit—creating space for reflection, meaning-making, and emotional renewal. In this sense, wellness supports not only recovery from strain but also a broader sense of self-fulfillment and relational harmony, echoing historic literary representations such as Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), in which self-actualization is inseparable from wholeness, further demonstrating that Black women's need for care is not new.

Importantly, wellness is not merely personal maintenance but a collective and political stance. Restorative care, mentorship, and culturally responsive mental health supports affirm the value of Black women's lives and labor within systems that often render them expendable (Bryant, 2020; Smith, 2022; Steiner et al., 2022; Boswell, 2024). Through these practices, wellness becomes a foundation for sustainability—enabling Black women principals not only to

remain present and grounded, but also to lead in ways that resist depletion and reimagine what ethical, life-affirming leadership can look like.

Collectively, health, survival, and wellness are not discrete or sequential experiences for Black female principals but interconnected and mutually reinforcing dimensions shaped by intersecting systems of race, gender, and institutional power (see Figure 1). Health reflects the embodied risks and cumulative harm produced by structural inequities and chronic stress exposure; survival involves strategic, relational, and political actions that sustain leadership within and against hostile institutional contexts; and wellness encompasses culturally grounded practices of restoration, care, and self-definition. Viewed through an intersectional lens, these domains operate simultaneously, linking harm, healing, and resistance in ways that challenge traditional leadership models grounded in individualism and neutrality. Collectively, these practices redefine leadership on Black women's terms and demonstrate that professional efficacy is inseparable from collective care, cultural connection, and systemic resistance. Understanding these interconnections is essential to supporting Black female principals and to reimagining leadership frameworks that prioritize equity, protection, and human flourishing.

Figure 1

Intersectional Framework of Health, Survival, and Wellness Among Black Women Educational Leaders

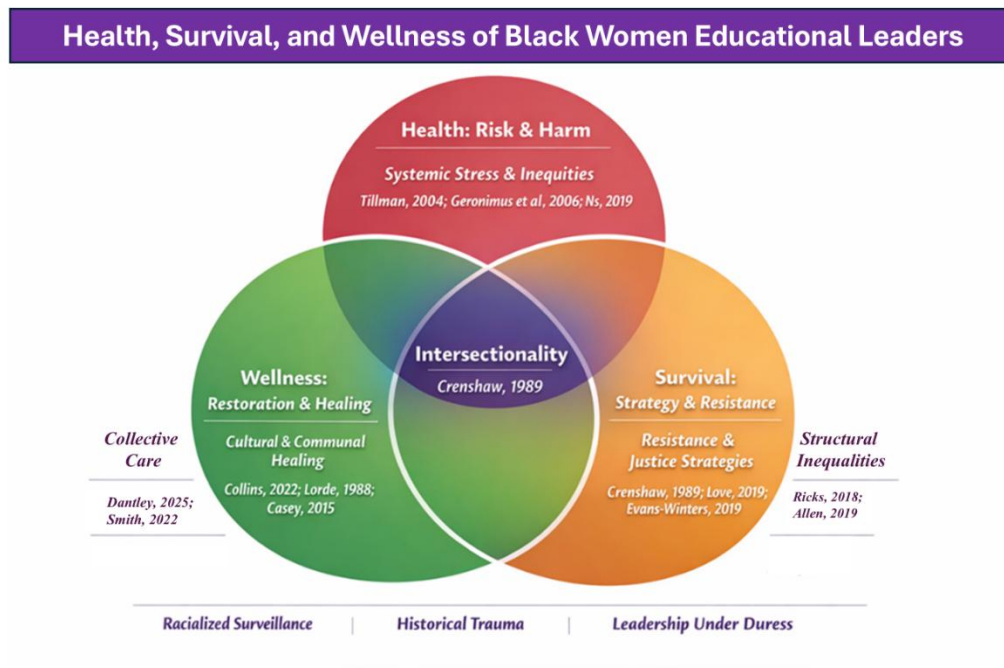


Diagram created by the author.

The diagram illustrates how health (risk and harm), survival (strategy and resistance), and wellness (restoration and healing) connect through an intersectionality lens. Health risks are shaped by systemic stress and inequities (Tillman, 2004, 2009; Geronimus et al., 2006; Ricks, 2018). Survival reflects relational, cultural, and structural resistance strategies (Love, 2019; Evans-Winters, 2019; Smith, 2022). Wellness emphasizes cultural grounding, spirituality, and collective care (Collins, 2022; Lorde, 1988; Casey, 2015). These domains demonstrate that leadership sustainability is relational, culturally grounded, and politically situated.

Although scholarship documents the systemic pressures facing Black female principals, far less research examines how these conditions shape their health, wellness, and long-term survival (Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2021). Much of the leadership literature continues to treat principal well-being as a general or gender-neutral issue, overlooking how race, gender, and school context interact to produce distinct risks for Black women (Jean-Marie, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2026). Centering the lived experiences of Black female principals is therefore essential to understanding how leaders sustain themselves amid chronic stress, institutional neglect, and structural bias. Such inquiry illuminates the strategies Black women employ to remain effective while also informing policies and supports that affirm their expertise, protect their well-being, and strengthen their contributions to educational equity and justice.

Research Methods

This study sought to answer the research question: How do Black female principals navigate leadership challenges, professional responsibilities, and personal well-being in public

K-12 schools? I used semi-structured interviews and narrative analysis as primary research methods. Data collection was based on one focus group, with structured individual interviews conducted afterward to leverage both the social benefits of dialogue among Black women and the depth of one-on-one interactions (Brock, 2019). The purpose of the interviews was to offer Black female principals a safe, supportive environment to share their experiences, the personal impact of leading in public schools, and related survival and wellness strategies.

Participants and Recruitment

The study involved 6 Black female principals who had previously worked in, or were working at, urban public K-12 schools in the Pacific Northwest at the time of the study. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure that each participant had at least two years as a school leader in an urban public K-12 school and identified as a Black or African American female. I contacted potential participants whom I knew through professional networks, key colleagues, and follow-up referrals. Each participant received an email invitation that explained the purpose of the study, emphasized the value of their voices, clarified confidentiality measures, and addressed any questions before requesting consent. Interested participants completed a form that gathered years of experience, allergies/dietary needs, schedule availability, consent to video and voice recordings, and a space to ask questions or leave comments.

Participant Biographies

Participants' years of leadership experience ranged from 3 to more than 20 years as school administrators. Notably, participants frequently introduced themselves through their relational identities before discussing their professional accomplishments. Sunday described

herself as a mother, wife, community member, and servant leader. Sorella emphasized her role as a mother, grandmother, daughter, and auntie before identifying herself as an educator. Angel introduced herself as a daughter, wife, grandmother, and lifelong learner. Sunny described herself as a daughter, aunt, educator, mentor, and creative thinker. Esperanza identified her husband and son as central to her identity and purpose. Blaze reflected on her role as a mother, caregiver, daughter, and child of God before discussing her professional accomplishments.

Sunday. A proud Black woman, she identifies first and foremost as a devoted mother, loving wife, caring daughter, and supportive sister. She embodies the principles of servant leadership, dedicating more than two decades to education, including the past three years as a passionate principal. Her commitment to teaching extends beyond the classroom, as she also teaches Sunday school, sharing her love of learning and faith with her community's youth. Academically accomplished, she holds multiple degrees that reflect her diverse expertise, including specializations in curriculum and instruction, special education, and early childhood education (pre-K). Her extensive knowledge equips her to address diverse educational needs and adapt to the unique challenges her students face. Driven by a deep-seated desire to make a positive impact within her community, she possesses a fervent passion for working with children. She believes that every child deserves a nurturing and inspiring environment to thrive, and she works tirelessly to ensure that her school fosters such a space. Through her leadership and dedication, she strives to empower the next generation and contribute to the overall betterment of her community.

Sunny. Sunny hails from the sun-soaked state of California, where she has devoted more than four decades to the field of education. Over the course of her impressive career, she dedicated 21 years to serving as an elementary principal, during which she demonstrated an unwavering

commitment to improving student achievement. Sunny is passionate about fostering an environment where innovative teaching and diverse learning strategies can thrive, believing that every child has the potential to succeed when given the right tools and support. To bolster her expertise in this area, she earned a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction, equipping her with the knowledge and skills to design effective educational programs that meet the varied needs of her students. Through her leadership and vision, Sunny has made a lasting impact on her school community and continues to inspire educators and students alike.

Angel. She is a dedicated "Champion for Children," embodying the roles of a loving mother, supportive wife, passionate teacher, and inspiring leader. As a God-fearing Black woman with over 25 years of experience in education, she has dedicated her career to nurturing and empowering young minds. Currently, she serves as an elementary principal, where her commitment to fostering a positive and enriching learning environment shines through. Beyond her professional responsibilities, she actively gives back to her community, believing in the importance of service and involvement in the lives of those around her. In her free time, she enjoys a variety of activities. She loves immersing herself in books, enjoying the escape and knowledge they provide, and watching cooking shows, which inspire her culinary creativity. When she's not reading or watching her favorite shows, she enjoys hitting the greens with her husband, embracing their shared passion for golf. Above all, she cherishes every moment spent with her family, valuing the strength and love that binds them together.

Blaze. She is a dedicated middle school principal and a proud single parent, embarking on her 18th year in education, with 8 of those years devoted to administrative roles. Beyond her professional commitments, she has a vibrant passion for the arts and actively participates in local community theater productions, where she finds joy in performing and connecting with others. A

firm believer in giving back, she is also deeply involved in her church, contributing her time and energy to various community initiatives. Her advocacy work focuses on raising awareness around breast cancer screening and education, an effort rooted in personal experience.

Celebrating an inspiring milestone of five years cancer-free, she has taken her journey a step further by authoring a book to guide and uplift others facing similar challenges. Having recently relocated from the South to the Pacific Northwest, she continues to explore and embrace her new surroundings, finding joy in the region's natural beauty and unique culture as she navigates this next chapter of her life.

Sorella. At the heart of her world is her role as a devoted mother, and nothing brings her more joy than her grandson, who truly means everything to her. Her passion for education has been a lifelong journey, spanning nearly three decades during which she has taken on various roles within the field. For over 14 years, she served as an elementary school leader, guiding young minds with her wisdom and dedication. Coming from a large family, she holds deep appreciation for those bonds and prioritizes her loved ones above all else. Her home is a welcoming space, always open for family gatherings, where laughter and love fill the air. This nurturing spirit fosters strong connections, creating a warm environment for her relatives. Embracing her authentic self, she has a unique sense of style that reflects her personality. Always dressing to impress, she takes pride in presenting herself well, combining elegance with comfort in her wardrobe choices. She truly embodies the essence of family, passion, and individuality.

Esperanza. She is a dedicated mother, loving wife, and passionate educational leader with 4 years of experience in leadership roles in the education sector. Currently, she serves as the principal of a high school, where she is responsible for shaping the academic and social environment for her students and staff. Although she finds the demands of leadership

challenging, the fulfillment it brings her is immeasurable. In her free time, she deeply values the moments spent with her family, whether it's enjoying a cozy movie night at home or exploring the outdoors together. Avidly curious, she enjoys diving into various literary genres, which not only enrich her mind but also inspire her leadership style. She also prioritizes her physical well-being by engaging in a range of activities, from yoga and running to team sports, which help her stay energized and resilient amid her busy schedule.

Sunday <i>(KW)</i>	5 years in educational leadership.
Sunny <i>(SS)</i>	21 years in educational leadership.
Angel <i>(AB)</i>	16 years in educational leadership.
Blaze <i>(AT)</i>	8 years in educational leadership.
Sorella <i>(SW)</i>	14 years in educational leadership.
Esperanza <i>(HP)</i>	4 years in educational leadership.

Research Design and Data Collection

Data collection consisted of two stages: one focus group interview, followed by individual interviews. The focus group included three participants and lasted approximately 3.5 hours. Five of the six participants were scheduled to attend the focus group, but due to work

demands, two were unable to attend. The purpose of the focus group was to build rapport, create a supportive peer-to-peer dialogue, create sisterhood, and gather initial perspectives on leadership, well-being, and professional experiences. The session was held at a local family home, creating a comfortable, accessible setting that promoted community building and openness. We gathered in the living room, arranged with soft leather individual couches and throw blankets, and fellowshiped over food and beverages before and after the interview. This helped create space for connection and sisterhood. Interview questions explored the experiences of Black female principals in challenging school contexts. Participants were asked to introduce themselves and describe their leadership experiences and personal identities using a single word each. Key topics included the impacts of racism and sexism on leadership journeys, strategies for resilience and grounding, and the importance of collective support among Black female principals (For a complete list of interview questions, see Appendix A).

Each of the six participants then had a one-on-one interview lasting 45 minutes to two hours. I created time to ask the questions from the focus group interview to the three participants who weren't able to attend. To meet each participant's professional and personal needs, I was flexible and allowed participants to choose the interview location. I conducted interviews at participants' homes, at my house, and via a remote platform. These interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of individual experiences, personal well-being, coping strategies, and the impact of professional responsibilities on self-perception. Individual interviews inquired about definitions of wellness and health in leadership roles, the environments in which participants feel safe and effective, the various facets of their personalities and experiences that individuals safeguard while assuming leadership roles, and what participants would communicate to policymakers. Finally, participants discussed healing processes and additional insights they

wished to share. Overall, the questions aimed to elicit rich narratives surrounding identity, leadership, and well-being (see Appendix A).

All interviews were video- and audio-recorded using high-quality recording devices, ensuring that every nuance of participants' narratives was preserved. Transcriptions were produced using a combination of AI-assisted software and manual verification to ensure accuracy. Participants were given the opportunity to expand or clarify any of their responses, with some doing so through additional unstructured conversations and text messages. While no participants changed what they stated during their interviews, some added or elaborated on certain points. This step promoted transparency, collaboration, and authenticity in the research process and allowed participants to edit, clarify, or otherwise omit any information. Confidentiality was reinforced by assigning pseudonyms and removing personal, professional, or related identifying details from all transcripts and analyses.

Data Analysis

Transcripts from the focus group and individual interviews were analyzed using narrative analysis, guided by principles of Black Feminist Thought. The narrative coding focused on identifying key themes related to leadership, resilience, health, and emotional well-being, capturing both individual and collective experiences. The analysis produced a dynamic narrative record, weaving participants' stories into a coherent and meaningful account that highlights the lived experiences of Black female principals (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative analysis enabled a detailed exploration of participants' lived experiences, capturing the richness, nuance, and complexity of their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The collected data were coded thematically to uncover patterns and insights related to leadership, well-being, and resilience.

Findings

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how Black female principals navigate leadership challenges, professional responsibilities, and personal well-being in public K–12 schools. Through individual interviews and a focus group, six Black female principals shared their experiences leading schools as they navigated the intersecting realities of race, gender, leadership, family responsibilities, and wellness. Grounded in Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2022), this study centered participants' lived experiences as valuable sources of knowledge and sought to understand how Black women make meaning of their leadership journeys within educational systems that have historically marginalized their voices.

Analysis of the interview and focus group data revealed four interconnected themes: (1) Leading with Purpose: Identity, Calling, and Service; (2) Leading Under Scrutiny: Navigating Anti-Blackness, Racism, and Sexism; (3) The Hidden Costs of Leadership: Emotional Labor, Isolation, and the Fight for Wellness; and (4) Collective Care as Resistance: Faith, Sisterhood, and Healing. While each theme is presented separately, participants' experiences often overlapped across themes, reflecting the complexity of Black women's leadership experiences. Together, these findings illuminate how Black female principals lead, resist, persist, and care for themselves and others within systems that often require extraordinary resilience.

The six participants represented diverse educational experiences and leadership contexts while sharing a common commitment to serving children, families, and communities. Collectively, participants brought more than 130 years of educational experience and served as principals at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

The interviews were characterized by openness, vulnerability, laughter, joy, frustration, anger, and, at times, tears. Participants frequently laughed while sharing stories about students, families, and meaningful leadership experiences. Moments of joy often emerged when discussing student success, mentorship, and their impact on their communities. However, conversations also revealed deep frustration and sadness as participants reflected on racism, sexism, professional betrayals, health challenges, and the personal costs of leadership. Several participants became emotional while discussing experiences that had profoundly shaped their professional and personal lives. At times, the interviews appeared to function as spaces of reflection and release, allowing participants to name experiences they had often carried privately throughout their careers.

The focus group created a distinctly communal atmosphere. Prior to the formal discussion, participants gathered over food and refreshments prepared by the researcher and her family. Participants spent time talking, laughing, sharing stories, and getting to know one another before the interview began. This informal fellowship helped establish trust and created a welcoming environment that encouraged honest and meaningful conversation. Throughout the discussion, participants frequently affirmed one another's experiences, built upon one another's comments, and engaged in collective reflection. Rather than functioning solely as a data-collection activity, the focus group became a space for validation, connection, and collective meaning-making, which the individual interviews then continued to explore.

Theme 1: Leading with Purpose: Identity, Calling, and Service

Participants consistently described leadership as a calling rooted in service rather than authority. Their narratives reflected a deep commitment to students, families, and communities, often positioning educational leadership as an extension of their personal values and identities. While participants expressed pride in their work, they also acknowledged that leadership required sacrifice, perseverance, and continuous adaptation.

For example, Sunday described herself first through the lens of service, explaining,

“I am a mother. I am a wife. I am a community member that serves in my community. I pride myself on being a servant leader. My life blends. I'm just coming from serving from church today, and now I'm picking up and doing that same work in my professional life, serving yet again.”

Her statement illustrates how leadership extended beyond the schoolhouse and reflected a broader commitment to community care and collective responsibility. Sunday further described herself as “a good example or a model for my community and students and people that look like me,” emphasizing the importance of representation and visibility within her leadership role.

Similarly, Angel framed leadership as advocacy and service. Throughout her interview, she repeatedly returned to the needs of children and families as the foundation of her work. Her self-identification as a “Champion for Children” reflected a commitment to ensuring students received opportunities, support, and equitable educational experiences. For Angel, leadership was not simply about managing schools but about creating conditions where children could thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Participants consistently connected leadership to purpose. Sunday described leadership as “life-changing,” explaining that leadership had strengthened her ability to “push against and resist and just stand in who I am and for why I’m here, especially for Black and Brown kids.” Her narrative suggested that leadership involved not only serving students but also remaining committed to equity despite resistance and challenges.

The focus group revealed similar understandings of leadership. Participants described their work as meaningful because of its impact on students and communities. Sunny reflected on the long-term influence of educational leadership, explaining that former students often remembered something meaningful their principals had said or done years later. For Sunny, witnessing those lasting impacts provided affirmation that her work mattered and reinforced her commitment to educational leadership.

Participants also described leadership as a process of transformation that often emerged through challenge. Blaze offered one of the most memorable descriptions when asked how leadership had affected her. Rather than identifying a positive or negative outcome, she described leadership as “painful growth.” When asked to explain, Blaze reflected on entering administration under a principal who expected Black women leaders to carry the operational responsibilities of the school while receiving little recognition for their contributions. She recalled, “We learned, we had to learn. We were forced to fly, and you either pick it up, right? Or you swim.” Her description of leadership as painful growth captured the reality that for these Black women principals, leadership often developed through adversity, sacrifice, and perseverance rather than comfort.

Blaze's narrative also vividly illustrated the relationship between leadership, sacrifice, and survival. Throughout her interview, she discussed balancing school leadership while

undergoing breast cancer treatment. Despite surgery, radiation, and ongoing medical challenges, she continued to lead her school community. Reflecting on this period, she described maintaining school operations while simultaneously navigating treatment and recovery. Her experience revealed both the extraordinary commitment participants brought to their work and the unrealistic expectations often placed upon Black women leaders. Blaze's story underscored how survival itself became a leadership practice.

Participants repeatedly returned to the idea that leadership required resilience. Sorella reflected on learning to survive unrealistic expectations after nearly sacrificing her health in an attempt to meet them. Esperanza discussed the importance of maintaining work-life balance and establishing boundaries to sustain herself over time. Sunny emphasized the significance of mentorship and learning from other Black women leaders who demonstrated how to navigate leadership while preserving a sense of self. Across narratives, participants suggested that leadership could not be sustained through purpose alone. Instead, purpose required support, adaptation, boundaries, and survival strategies.

Collectively, participants' stories reveal that leadership is far more than a professional position. For these Black female principals, leadership represented a calling grounded in service, advocacy, community responsibility, and personal sacrifice. Their narratives illustrate how purpose and survival operate simultaneously, requiring Black women leaders to continually navigate challenges while remaining committed to the students, families, and communities they serve.

Theme 2: Leading Under Scrutiny: Navigating Anti-Blackness, Racism, and Sexism

Participants consistently described experiences of racism and sexism that shaped their leadership journeys. Rather than recounting isolated incidents, participants portrayed racism and sexism as ongoing realities that influenced how they were perceived, evaluated, trusted, and supported within educational spaces. Across interviews and the focus group, participants described navigating systems in which they were often expected to outperform their peers while simultaneously having their expertise questioned, their decisions scrutinized, and their authority challenged. Their narratives revealed that racism and sexism functioned not merely as interpersonal experiences but as structural realities embedded within educational institutions.

A recurring pattern across participant narratives involved the questioning of competence. Several participants described feeling held to different standards than their white colleagues and required to continually prove themselves despite years of experience and demonstrated success. Esperanza stated plainly, “Sexism and racism happen frequently,” explaining that decisions she made as a principal often received greater scrutiny than those made by her predecessor. She reflected that while accountability was expected, constant second-guessing suggested that others questioned her judgment and leadership abilities. Esperanza further described being blamed for unpopular decisions even when she lacked final authority, highlighting the gendered expectations often placed upon women leaders. These experiences reinforced her perception that Black women leaders are frequently viewed through a lens of suspicion rather than trust.

Similarly, Sunday described leadership as requiring constant resistance and advocacy. She discussed pushback she received when creating affinity spaces for Black families and students, noting that some white families questioned why Black families were being provided opportunities for connection and support. Sunday explained that hearing Black families express

appreciation for these spaces affirmed the importance of the work despite the resistance she encountered. Reflecting on these experiences, she noted that leadership required her to remain committed to her purpose even when others questioned her decisions. Sunday's narrative illustrates how efforts to center Black students and families are often challenged within educational environments that prioritize white comfort and dominant norms.

Participants also described experiencing racialized and gendered stereotypes that influenced how others interacted with them. Several discussed the need to carefully monitor their tone, demeanor, appearance, and communication style to avoid being perceived as angry, aggressive, emotional, or unprofessional. These experiences required participants to engage in constant self-monitoring while simultaneously carrying the responsibilities of school leadership.

Blaze provided one of the clearest examples of institutional marginalization. During her interview, she recounted helping establish and build a school while carrying significant leadership responsibilities. Despite her contributions, she learned during a board meeting that leadership intended to appoint a white male candidate to a position she believed she had earned through her work and dedication. Reflecting on the experience, Blaze described the moment as both shocking and painful because she had invested years of effort into developing the school. The decision communicated that her expertise, commitment, and sacrifices were not valued in the same way as those of a white male candidate. The experience left her feeling invisible despite the significant role she had played in the school's creation. Her story illustrates how institutional decision-making processes can reinforce racialized and gendered hierarchies even when Black women demonstrate exceptional leadership capacity.

Participants further described racism and sexism as cumulative experiences that extended beyond individual incidents. Sunny reflected on the emotional toll of constantly navigating

systems where Black women leaders were expected to prove themselves repeatedly. She explained that throughout her career she felt pressure to have all the answers because others were continually searching for weaknesses in her leadership. Sunny recalled feeling that individuals often waited for her to make a mistake, creating an environment in which mistakes carried greater consequences than they might for others. She stated:

“I always felt like, particularly in the beginning, that I had to have the answers and that I knew people were looking for places where they figured there was a weakness in my leadership.”

Sunny's reflection captures the heightened scrutiny many participants described throughout their careers. Rather than being afforded the opportunity to learn through mistakes, participants often felt they were expected to demonstrate excellence at all times.

Sorella similarly discussed the impossibility of separating race from leadership experiences. Throughout her interview, she reflected on how racism shaped interactions with colleagues, district leaders, and community members. Her narrative suggested that Black women principals are often viewed through racialized assumptions before their expertise, qualifications, or accomplishments are considered. Participants repeatedly emphasized that people often saw a Black woman first and a leader second.

The focus group discussion further reinforced participants' understanding of racism and sexism as systemic realities. Participants collectively reflected on being expected to work harder, know more, and perform better than their peers, while receiving fewer opportunities for grace, support, or error correction. During one exchange, participants discussed the pressure to remain strong despite constant challenges. They noted that many Black women principals carry burdens privately because acknowledging difficulties can be interpreted as weakness or incompetence. The group repeatedly returned to the idea that Black women leaders are often required to be

twice as good while simultaneously receiving less trust and support than others. These conversations revealed that participants understood racism and sexism not as isolated experiences but as interconnected systems that shape leadership opportunities, expectations, and outcomes.

Several participants also discussed the emotional consequences of navigating these realities. Anger, frustration, disappointment, and exhaustion emerged throughout the interviews. Yet participants rarely described withdrawing from leadership. Instead, they described becoming more determined, more strategic, and more committed to advocating for students and communities. Sunday explained that leadership had strengthened her ability to “stand in who I am and for why I’m here,” particularly when advocating for Black and Brown children. Her statement illustrates how participants converted their experiences into a driving force for ongoing advocacy and resistance.

Collectively, these narratives reveal that racism and sexism are not peripheral aspects of Black women's leadership experiences. Rather, they are central conditions that shape how participants navigate schools, districts, and professional relationships. Participants illustrated the persistent need to prove competence, resist stereotypes, advocate for equity, and navigate systems that frequently question their legitimacy. Their experiences demonstrate how anti-Blackness and sexism remain embedded within educational institutions and continue to shape the professional realities of Black female principals.

Theme 3: The Hidden Costs of Leadership: Emotional Labor, Isolation, and the Fight for Wellness

Although participants occupied highly visible leadership positions, many described feeling profoundly unseen and unsupported. Across the individual interviews and focus group, participants spoke candidly about the emotional labor required to lead schools while simultaneously navigating racism, sexism, heightened scrutiny, and the expectation that they remain unwaveringly strong. Their stories revealed that the responsibilities of school leadership extended far beyond instructional leadership or organizational management. Rather, participants described carrying the emotional weight of supporting students, families, teachers, and communities while suppressing their own needs. Consequently, leadership was often experienced not only as meaningful work but also as emotionally, physically, and psychologically costly.

As participants reflected on their leadership journeys, conversations frequently shifted from descriptions of daily responsibilities to discussions of survival. While each participant's experiences differed, they consistently described leadership as requiring continual self-monitoring, emotional regulation, and resilience within systems that offered little grace or support. Rather than identifying isolated incidents of stress, participants portrayed these experiences as cumulative, producing long-term consequences for their health, relationships, and overall well-being.

One of the strongest patterns across interviews involved the pressure to constantly prove competence. Participants described entering leadership already aware that they would be evaluated differently than many of their White colleagues. Rather than assuming trust, they expected skepticism. Rather than seeing mistakes as opportunities to learn, they anticipated that

they would be magnified and remembered. This heightened visibility created a continual sense that they had to outperform simply to be viewed as capable.

Sunday described this pressure as a persistent need to justify both her decisions and her leadership. Although she had served her school community for years before becoming principal, she found herself continually questioned after assuming the leadership role. She explained that decisions regarding budgeting, staffing, and instructional priorities were routinely challenged in ways that communicated distrust rather than collaboration. Reflecting on this experience, she observed that "there's that sense of having to prove...that's a real thing...I'm not crazy...this is really happening" (Sunday, individual interview). Rather than interpreting these experiences as isolated disagreements, Sunday understood them as part of a broader pattern in which Black women leaders were expected to continually demonstrate competence despite years of experience and established relationships.

Sunny described similar experiences across her more than two decades as a principal. Early in her administrative career, she felt compelled to always have the answers because she believed others were waiting for evidence that she was incapable. She reflected, "I always felt like, particularly in the beginning, that I had to have the answers, and that I knew people were looking for places where they figured there was a weakness in my leadership."

Sunny explained that this expectation shaped how she approached every decision. Rather than feeling free to grow into leadership, she often felt responsible for anticipating criticism. She described colleagues who questioned her intentions, challenged proposed changes, and attempted to undermine initiatives before they could succeed. Looking back on those experiences, she

recognized that much of her emotional exhaustion stemmed not from the work itself but from the continual vigilance required to protect her credibility.

Esperanza similarly described leadership as requiring constant justification. She acknowledged that accountability is an expected part of school leadership; however, she distinguished accountability from continual second-guessing. She explained that decisions she made as principal routinely received greater scrutiny than those of her predecessor. Reflecting on these experiences, she stated that repeated questioning implied "an ulterior motive," leaving her feeling that her professional judgment was often viewed with suspicion rather than trust. She also discussed how gender shaped these experiences, noting that she was frequently blamed for unpopular decisions despite lacking final authority as an assistant principal. Esperanza's reflections illustrate how participants experienced race and gender as inseparable dimensions of leadership rather than distinct challenges.

As participants discussed these experiences, the emotional tone of the conversations noticeably shifted. Voices slowed, participants nodded in agreement, and laughter gave way to moments of quiet reflection. During the focus group, participants frequently affirmed one another's experiences before adding their own examples, creating a collective narrative that suggested these encounters were not individual anomalies but shared realities of leading while Black and female. Rather than questioning whether these experiences were "real," participants validated one another by acknowledging that each had encountered similar patterns of heightened scrutiny, diminished trust, and increased expectations.

Participants also described how hypervisibility existed alongside profound isolation. Despite interacting with hundreds of students, families, and staff members each day, many explained that leadership often felt remarkably lonely. Their positions required them to remain

composed, confident, and emotionally available for others while leaving few opportunities to express their own fears, frustrations, or uncertainty.

Sorella reflected that during her first principalship, she had virtually no boundaries. Having been mentored by a principal whose life revolved almost entirely around work, she believed that successful leadership required arriving before sunrise and remaining in the building until evening. Attempting to meet those expectations while raising four children and navigating significant family responsibilities eventually produced serious physical consequences. She recalled believing she was having a stroke after months of relentless stress, explaining that her body had begun signaling what she herself had refused to acknowledge—that the pace at which she was leading was unsustainable. Looking back, she reflected that stepping away from the principalship and later learning to delegate responsibility fundamentally changed how she understood leadership. Rather than viewing delegation as weakness, she came to understand it as essential to survival.

Blaze's narrative echoed this understanding of leadership's hidden costs. She described leadership as "painful growth," explaining that each advancement in her career required significant personal sacrifice. Long before becoming a principal, she had assumed caregiving responsibilities within her family, learning from an early age to prioritize others' needs over her own. Those same patterns continued throughout her professional life as she devoted herself to supporting teachers, students, and families. Yet, as she reflected on her journey, Blaze recognized that continual caregiving without adequate support carried significant emotional and physical consequences. Her story illustrated that the very qualities that made participants exceptional leaders—commitment, compassion, service, and perseverance—also made them vulnerable to exhaustion when institutional support was absent.

As participants reflected on the demands of leadership, they repeatedly returned to the invisible emotional labor required to sustain schools and support others. Beyond instructional leadership, budgeting, evaluations, and school improvement efforts, participants described carrying the emotional burdens of students, families, teachers, and their broader communities. They frequently served as counselors, mediators, advocates, and protectors while simultaneously managing their own emotional responses to racism, sexism, and institutional inequities. Participants rarely described this labor as optional; rather, they viewed it as an expectation placed upon Black women leaders.

Several participants explained that emotional labor extended beyond supporting those within their schools. They also found themselves navigating the emotions and expectations of district leaders, school boards, and community members while carefully regulating their own responses. Angel reflected that one of the greatest challenges of leadership was continually having her decisions questioned despite years of experience. She described the exhaustion of repeatedly proving that she had followed appropriate procedures and earned her position through hard work rather than favoritism. More painful, however, were moments when she felt unsupported by individuals who shared her racial identity. She explained that these experiences often felt like betrayal because she assumed solidarity would naturally exist among those with similar lived experiences. Rather than strengthening her support network, these interactions sometimes deepened her sense of isolation.

Participants also discussed the physical consequences of prolonged stress. Although each woman described different wellness practices, they consistently acknowledged that leadership affected their health in tangible ways. During the focus group, conversations about burnout quickly evolved into stories about colleagues whose health had deteriorated under the demands

of educational leadership. Participants exchanged stories of Black women leaders who continued working despite illness, delayed medical care because of professional responsibilities, or experienced significant health challenges after years of carrying the weight of leadership. As these stories unfolded, the room grew noticeably quieter. Participants nodded in agreement, paused before responding, and often completed one another's thoughts, illustrating that these experiences were widely recognized rather than exceptional.

Sorella offered one of the clearest examples of how leadership responsibilities affected her physical well-being. Reflecting on her first principalship, she described sacrificing her own health to meet unrealistic expectations set by previous leaders. She recalled working excessively long hours, attempting to manage every responsibility herself, and neglecting her own needs while caring for staff, students, and her family. Eventually, the cumulative stress manifested physically. She explained that she genuinely believed she was having a stroke after experiencing persistent eye twitching, overwhelming fatigue, and chronic stress. Looking back, she recognized that her body was responding to prolonged emotional strain. This realization prompted her to redefine leadership, learning to build strong teams, delegate responsibilities, and establish healthier professional boundaries. Rather than viewing these changes as signs of weakness, Sorella came to understand them as necessary acts of self-preservation.

Sunny similarly reflected on witnessing the physical consequences of educational leadership throughout her career. She explained that observing Black women become seriously ill after years of overwork influenced how she approached her own leadership practice. Determined not to sacrifice her health, she intentionally protected time away from work by refusing to spend weekends at school whenever possible. She emphasized that creating boundaries was not an indication of diminished commitment but rather a strategy that allowed

her to remain effective throughout a lengthy career. She also described intentionally creating moments of quiet reflection, listening to music, and seeking trusted individuals with whom she could process difficult experiences. These practices enabled her to decompress after emotionally demanding days and prevented leadership challenges from overwhelming her personal life. As she reflected, "it can spoil your dinner, but don't let it spoil your breakfast," illustrating her intentional effort to prevent difficult days from consuming her emotional well-being.

Participants consistently framed wellness not as self-indulgence but as an essential component of sustainable leadership. Esperanza described wellness as intentionally maximizing work-life balance through exercise, yoga, therapy, reading, and spending time with her husband and son. She explained that she even set an alarm reminding herself to stop thinking about work each evening, recognizing that leadership responsibilities could easily consume every aspect of her life if left unchecked. For Esperanza, protecting her emotional health required conscious decisions to establish boundaries and prioritize joy. She described happiness itself as "super healthy," emphasizing that wellness involved cultivating experiences that replenished rather than depleted her energy.

Angel also described a significant shift in how she approached work over the course of her career. Whereas she once routinely brought work home each evening and resumed working after dinner, she eventually concluded that this pattern was neither healthy nor sustainable. She intentionally established clearer work-life boundaries, explaining that once she left school each afternoon, unfinished work would remain until the following day. Although she acknowledged that this adjustment required letting go of unrealistic expectations, it ultimately allowed her to care for herself more intentionally and remain present with her family. Angel's reflections

suggest that sustainable leadership required participants to challenge professional norms that equated endless availability with effectiveness.

Throughout both the interviews and the focus group, participants repeatedly challenged the dominant assumption that wellness is solely an individual responsibility. Instead, they described wellness as profoundly shaped by institutional conditions. Participants argued that no amount of exercise, prayer, therapy, or self-care could fully compensate for organizational cultures characterized by excessive workloads, racialized scrutiny, inadequate support, and unrealistic expectations. Rather than locating burnout within individual shortcomings, participants situated it within educational systems that consistently demanded more from Black women while providing fewer opportunities for rest, grace, or support.

Collectively, these narratives reveal that the hidden costs of leadership extend far beyond the visible responsibilities associated with the principalship. Hypervisibility, emotional labor, isolation, and chronic stress shaped participants' professional and personal lives in ways that affected their physical health, emotional well-being, and relationships. Although participants remained deeply committed to serving students and communities, their stories demonstrate that such commitment frequently required extraordinary personal sacrifice. At the same time, their narratives reveal remarkable agency as participants intentionally established boundaries, sought trusted relationships, engaged in therapy, protected time with family, embraced restorative practices, and redefined leadership in ways that honored both their commitment to others and their responsibility to themselves. These findings suggest that wellness for Black female principals is not simply an individual concern but a leadership issue deeply influenced by institutional expectations, systemic inequities, and the ongoing realities of leading while Black and female.

Theme 4: Collective Care as Resistance: Faith, Sisterhood, and Healing

Although participants described leadership as emotionally demanding and, at times, physically exhausting, they also identified powerful sources of healing that sustained them throughout their careers. Across the interviews and focus group, faith, spirituality, mentorship, sisterhood, and collective care consistently emerged as essential resources that enabled participants not only to endure the challenges of educational leadership but also to continue leading with hope, purpose, and conviction. Rather than describing healing as an individual endeavor, participants emphasized that restoration occurred through relationships, shared experiences, spiritual grounding, and intentional spaces where Black women could exist authentically without explanation or performance.

One of the most striking findings across the interviews was the extent to which participants viewed leadership as inseparable from their faith. Participants rarely described spirituality as something practiced outside of work. Instead, faith shaped how they made decisions, responded to adversity, advocated for students, and understood their purpose as educational leaders. Leadership was consistently framed as a calling rather than simply a profession.

Sunday described this relationship between faith and leadership from the beginning of her interview. Introducing herself first as a mother, wife, community member, and servant leader, she explained,

"I pride myself on being a servant leader. My life blends. I'm just coming from serving from church today, and now I'm picking up and doing that same work in my professional life, serving yet again."

Rather than separating her personal faith from her professional responsibilities, Sunday understood both as expressions of the same commitment to service. Her leadership extended beyond managing a school; it reflected a broader calling to care for children, families, and her community. Throughout her interview, she repeatedly returned to the idea that educational leadership represented ministry through service rather than authority through position.

Prayer emerged repeatedly as one of participants' most important sources of strength. Sunday described prayer as essential to remaining grounded amid the daily realities of racism, resistance, and leadership. Reflecting on what sustained her through difficult moments, she shared,

"Prayer keeps me going...if I didn't have that, I pray 10,000 times a day just to keep me grounded in my purpose."

Her words suggest that prayer functioned not only as a spiritual practice but also as a means of emotional regulation, reflection, and reassurance. Rather than removing difficult circumstances, prayer allowed her to remain committed to the work despite them. As Sunday described advocating for Black students and families while encountering resistance, faith continually redirected her attention to the purpose of her leadership rather than the obstacles surrounding it.

Blaze similarly described faith as the foundation of her leadership identity. Before discussing her professional accomplishments, she introduced herself as "a child of God," explaining that her faith grounded every aspect of who she was. Later, as she reflected on what sustained her throughout years of leadership, caregiving, and personal adversity, Blaze returned once again to spirituality, explaining,

"What keeps me grounded in this work is just being a child of God and my faith."

Rather than describing faith as a response to crisis alone, Blaze portrayed spirituality as a daily orientation toward leadership. Her comments suggest that faith shaped how she interpreted challenges, approached relationships, and remained hopeful despite repeated disappointments. Even as she described leadership as "painful growth," her narrative consistently returned to purpose rather than defeat.

The focus group reinforced these individual narratives while revealing how participants collectively understood spirituality. As women shared stories of difficult leadership experiences, conversations naturally shifted toward the role of prayer, church communities, music, and spiritual practices in helping them continue. Participants frequently nodded in agreement before adding their own experiences, often completing one another's thoughts without interruption. Rather than debating the importance of faith, participants assumed its centrality within their leadership journeys. This shared understanding reflected a collective worldview in which spirituality functioned not only as personal belief but also as communal knowledge passed among Black women leaders.

Music also emerged as an important expression of spirituality and restoration. Sunny explained that gospel music had become one of her most consistent sources of grounding throughout her career. She described listening to music before work, after difficult days, and whenever she needed to reconnect with her purpose. Reflecting on its significance, she explained that if her spirit was not healthy, nothing else would be healthy. Music allowed her to process emotions privately while restoring the emotional strength required to continue serving students and staff. Her reflections suggest that healing often occurred through culturally familiar practices deeply rooted within Black spiritual traditions.

As conversations shifted from faith to relationships, participants consistently emphasized that leadership could not be sustained in isolation. Although many described educational leadership as lonely, they simultaneously explained that healing became possible through relationships with other Black women who understood experiences that often required little explanation. Participants repeatedly distinguished these relationships from typical professional networks. Rather than focusing solely on problem-solving or career advancement, these relationships provided affirmation, emotional safety, accountability, and belonging.

Esperanza described this connection beautifully, explaining,

"We speak a secret language of understanding our struggles. It's hard to explain the dynamic, but it is therapeutic."

Her words captured a sentiment echoed throughout the interviews and focus group. Participants suggested that Black women leaders often recognized one another's experiences without lengthy explanations because they shared common understandings of racism, sexism, hypervisibility, emotional labor, and professional isolation. This shared understanding itself became a source of healing because participants no longer felt responsible for proving or justifying their experiences.

As participants reflected on the relationships that sustained them, mentorship consistently emerged as an essential component of leadership survival. Rather than describing mentorship solely as professional development, participants portrayed it as a relational process through which experienced Black women leaders created opportunities, modeled courageous leadership, and reminded one another that they belonged in spaces where they were often made to feel invisible. Mentorship was described not simply as receiving advice but as experiencing

affirmation from women who understood the unique realities of leading within educational systems shaped by racial and gender inequities.

Sunny reflected on the profound influence of the Black women who welcomed her into leadership. During the focus group, she described being intentionally placed in spaces where experienced Black women leaders openly discussed challenges, solved problems collectively, and demonstrated what courageous leadership looked like in practice. Rather than shielding emerging leaders from the realities of the profession, these women invited Sunny into authentic conversations about navigating systems while maintaining integrity. Looking back, she explained that these experiences fundamentally shaped the type of mentor she later became, intentionally creating similar opportunities for newer principals because someone had once done the same for her. Her reflections illustrate how mentorship functioned as an act of generational leadership in which knowledge, encouragement, and wisdom were intentionally passed from one Black woman leader to another.

The importance of mentorship also emerged in Blaze's interview as she reflected on her own leadership journey. She recalled Black women leaders who recognized her leadership potential long before she saw it herself. Their encouragement, guidance, and willingness to create opportunities allowed her to envision herself as a principal despite the challenges she would later encounter. As Blaze reflected on those experiences, she acknowledged that their investment extended beyond helping her secure a position; they helped cultivate the confidence necessary to remain in leadership despite adversity. Her narrative demonstrates that mentorship often served as both professional preparation and emotional affirmation.

As participants continued discussing relationships, conversations naturally shifted from mentorship to sisterhood. While mentorship often reflected relationships across generations of

leaders, sisterhood described reciprocal relationships among Black women who navigated leadership simultaneously. Participants consistently emphasized that these relationships provided something unavailable in many professional settings: psychological safety.

During the focus group, participants laughed together, completed one another's thoughts, nodded in agreement, and frequently responded with affirming statements before sharing their own experiences. Moments of laughter often followed deeply emotional conversations, illustrating how humor served as both a means of connection and a source of relief. At other times, discussions paused as participants reflected quietly before another woman gently expanded upon what had just been shared. Rather than competing for attention, participants collectively constructed meaning, validating one another's experiences through shared understanding. These interactions revealed that the focus group itself became a space of restoration where participants no longer needed to explain or defend their realities because every woman in the room already understood.

One particularly meaningful moment occurred as participants reflected on how leadership had transformed them. Rather than focusing exclusively on accomplishments, the conversation centered on growth, resilience, and unapologetically becoming themselves. Participants affirmed one another's journeys toward authenticity, discussing how years of navigating predominantly White educational systems had gradually strengthened their willingness to lead according to their own values rather than external expectations. Laughter frequently accompanied these reflections, yet beneath the humor was a shared recognition that authenticity had been hard-earned through years of challenge and perseverance.

Esperanza captured the significance of these relationships when she explained that Black women principals "speak a secret language of understanding." Although she acknowledged that

this dynamic was difficult to explain to those outside of their experiences, she described these relationships as therapeutic because they eliminated the need to justify emotions or explain the realities of racism and sexism. Instead, understanding existed almost immediately. Her comments suggest that healing often began with simply being believed.

Participants also emphasized that healing required vulnerability. Throughout the focus group, women openly acknowledged moments of exhaustion, frustration, grief, and self-doubt while simultaneously encouraging one another to continue. The atmosphere of the discussion differed noticeably from a traditional interview. What began as a research conversation increasingly resembled a gathering of trusted colleagues who were finally afforded uninterrupted time to speak honestly about experiences that were often minimized within their professional environments. Participants expressed emotions ranging from laughter to sadness, occasionally becoming tearful as they recounted particularly difficult moments. Yet these moments of vulnerability were consistently met with affirmation rather than judgment. As participants listened attentively, nodded in agreement, and shared similar experiences, vulnerability became a source of collective strength rather than individual weakness.

Researcher observations further illuminated the significance of these interactions. Prior to beginning the focus group, participants gathered over a shared meal, laughing, catching up, and reconnecting before the formal discussion began. Throughout the conversation, the atmosphere alternated between joyful celebration and deep emotional reflection. Participants laughed freely as they exchanged stories, yet they also became visibly emotional when discussing experiences of isolation, racism, and personal sacrifice. At several points, the room became quiet as women reflected on one another's stories before responding with affirmations such as "exactly," "that's it," or "I know." These moments demonstrated that the focus group served as more than a data-

collection activity; it became an act of communal healing in which participants recognized themselves in one another's narratives.

Collective care emerged as perhaps the most powerful finding within this theme. Participants consistently rejected the notion that resilience required navigating leadership alone. Instead, they emphasized the necessity of intentionally creating spaces where Black women leaders could share experiences, seek advice, celebrate successes, process disappointments, and remind one another of their purpose. Faith, mentorship, and sisterhood did not eliminate the challenges participants encountered within anti-Black educational systems. Rather, these relationships provided the emotional, spiritual, and relational resources necessary to continue leading despite those challenges.

Collectively, participants' narratives reveal that healing is neither accidental nor individualistic. Instead, healing occurs through relationships rooted in trust, shared cultural understanding, spiritual grounding, and mutual care. The findings suggest that faith, mentorship, sisterhood, and collective care function not merely as coping strategies but as intentional practices that sustain Black female principals within educational systems that frequently demand extraordinary emotional and professional labor. Through these interconnected sources of support, participants reclaimed joy, reaffirmed their purpose, and continued leading schools in ways that honored both their communities and themselves.

Findings Synthesis

The themes presented in this chapter show that participants' narratives revealed significant overlap across themes. Leadership as purpose and service was frequently intertwined with experiences of racism and sexism. Similarly, wellness challenges often emerged from

navigating systemic inequities, while faith, sisterhood, and collective care served as protective factors that supported participants' survival and resilience. Together, these findings illustrate the interconnected nature of Black women's leadership experiences and reinforce the central tenets of Black Feminist Thought, which recognizes the importance of lived experience, intersectionality, and collective knowledge in understanding Black women's lives.

Table 4.1 Summary of Themes and Participant Representation

Theme	Description	Participants Contributing to Theme	Representative Quote
Leading with Purpose: Identity, Calling, and Service	Participants described leadership as a calling rooted in service, advocacy, and commitment to students and communities while simultaneously requiring perseverance and survival.	Sunday, Angel, Blaze, Sunny, Sorella, Esperanza	"Painful growth." (Blaze)
Leading Under Scrutiny: Navigating Anti-Blackness, Racism, and Sexism	Participants described ongoing experiences of racism, sexism, heightened scrutiny, and the need to continually prove their competence within educational leadership spaces.	Sunday, Angel, Blaze, Sunny, Sorella, Esperanza	"I always felt like I had to have the answers." (Sunny)
The Hidden Costs of Leadership: Emotional Labor, Isolation, and the Fight for Wellness	Participants discussed emotional labor, burnout, health concerns, isolation, and the need to establish boundaries to sustain themselves in leadership.	Sunday, Angel, Blaze, Sunny, Sorella, Esperanza	"No one checks in." (Blaze)
Collective Care as Resistance: Faith, Sisterhood, and Healing	Participants identified prayer, spirituality, sisterhood, and community as essential sources of resilience, healing, and support.	Sunday, Angel, Blaze, Sunny, Sorella, Esperanza	"Prayer keeps me going." (Sunday)

Note. Themes emerged from the analysis of individual interviews and focus group discussions with six Black female principals. Participant names are pseudonyms.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black female principals navigate leadership challenges, professional responsibilities, and personal well-being within public K–12 schools. Through individual interviews and a focus group, six Black female principals shared narratives that illuminated the complexities of leading at the intersections of race, gender, family, faith, wellness, and educational leadership.

Analysis of participant narratives revealed four interconnected themes: Leading with Purpose: Identity, Calling, and Service; Leading Under Scrutiny: Navigating Anti-Blackness, Racism, and Sexism; The Hidden Costs of Leadership: Emotional Labor, Isolation, and the Fight for Wellness; and Faith, Sisterhood, and Collective Care as Resistance: Faith, Sisterhood, and Healing. Together, these themes illustrate that Black women principals experience leadership as both deeply meaningful and extraordinarily demanding. Participants viewed leadership as a calling rooted in service and advocacy, yet they also described navigating racism, sexism, heightened scrutiny, emotional labor, health challenges, and isolation. Their stories reveal the significant personal costs of educational leadership while highlighting the strength, resilience, and determination required to continue serving students and communities.

Participants' narratives highlight that survival is a collective experience, emphasizing the roles of faith, prayer, sisterhood, and communal care in overcoming adversity. These themes align with Black Feminist Thought, which underscores the significance of lived experiences, shared knowledge, and community-centered resistance. The stories indicate that wellness for Black female principals extends beyond individual self-care to encompass relationships, spirituality, and communal healing.

The findings reveal that while Black female principals lead in challenging systems that demand resilience and adaptation, they also display remarkable strength and a commitment to educational equity. Subsequent chapters will contextualize these findings within existing literature and theoretical frameworks, addressing their implications for educational leadership policy and practice, and providing recommendations to enhance the health and sustainability of Black women educational leaders.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how Black female principals navigate leadership challenges, professional responsibilities, and personal well-being while leading within public K–12 schools. Grounded in Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990, 2022), this study sought to understand how Black women educational leaders experience health, wellness, and survival within educational systems shaped by anti-Blackness, racism, and sexism. The findings revealed that participants experienced leadership as both meaningful and burdensome. While they described leadership as a calling rooted in service, advocacy, and community responsibility, they also described navigating heightened scrutiny, emotional labor, isolation, health challenges, and systemic inequities. Collectively, the findings suggest that health, wellness, and survival are not separate experiences for Black female principals but interconnected responses to leading within systems that often depend upon their labor while failing to adequately support their humanity.

A central finding of this study was participants' understanding of leadership as purpose-driven work grounded in service, advocacy, and community uplift. Participants consistently described themselves as mothers, caregivers, mentors, advocates, and community members before identifying themselves as principals. Their narratives challenge traditional educational leadership frameworks that emphasize managerial efficiency, accountability, and organizational effectiveness while often overlooking the relational dimensions of leadership (Bass, 2012; Tillman, 2004). Rather than viewing leadership as authority over others, participants framed leadership as responsibility to others. Their commitment to students, families, and communities

reflected what Collins (2022) identifies as an ethic of care, in which leadership is rooted in collective responsibility, empathy, and relational accountability.

Self-descriptions suggest that participants viewed leadership not as a role separate from their identities but as an extension of their commitments to family, faith, service, and community. Their narratives challenged traditional leadership frameworks that often separate professional identities from personal and relational responsibilities. Instead, participants described leadership as deeply intertwined with who they were as Black women, mothers, daughters, wives, caregivers, and community members.

These findings align with previous scholarship documenting the disproportionate emotional and relational labor expected of Black women educational leaders (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Collins, 2022; Tillman, 2004, 2009). Similar to findings by Khalifa et al. (2016) and Rogers-Ard and Knaus (2021), participants described leadership as requiring continuous advocacy, caregiving, and crisis management within systems that relied upon Black women's labor while frequently rendering that labor invisible. Participants often served as counselors, mediators, mentors, advocates, and protectors in addition to fulfilling traditional administrative responsibilities. However, the findings extend existing scholarship by demonstrating that participants did not simply endure these responsibilities; they embraced them as central to their purpose and identity as leaders. Leadership was not merely a professional role but an extension of their commitment to community and collective well-being.

At the same time, participants' narratives reveal that leadership cannot be understood apart from the racialized and gendered contexts in which it occurs. Consistent with Black Feminist Thought and intersectionality, participants described experiences that emerged not

solely because they were women or because they were Black, but because they occupied the intersection of both identities while holding positions of authority. Collins's (2022) concept of the matrix of domination provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. Participants consistently described heightened scrutiny, questioning of competence, exclusion from opportunities, and pressure to continually prove themselves. These findings support previous research demonstrating that Black women educational leaders frequently navigate organizational cultures that privilege whiteness and masculinity as markers of leadership legitimacy (Jean-Marie, 2006; Tillman, 2009; Knaus, 2014).

Participants' experiences further illustrate the persistence of controlling images and racialized gender surveillance described by Collins (2022), Harris-Perry (2011), and Crenshaw (1989). Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the need to carefully monitor their tone, appearance, communication styles, and emotional expression in order to avoid being perceived as angry, aggressive, emotional, or unprofessional. These experiences reflect the enduring influence of controlling images such as the “angry Black woman” and “strong Black woman,” which regulate how Black women are expected to behave within professional settings. Participants' accounts suggest that leadership required constant self-monitoring and emotional regulation, creating an additional layer of labor beyond their formal responsibilities.

Importantly, the findings suggest that anti-Blackness functions as more than interpersonal prejudice. Consistent with Dumas (2016), Dumas and Ross (2016), and Love (2019), participants' narratives indicate that anti-Blackness operates as a daily condition embedded within educational institutions. Participants described systems in which their expertise was frequently questioned, their decisions were more heavily scrutinized, and their opportunities for

advancement were constrained despite demonstrated competence and success. These experiences support arguments within the literature that anti-Blackness shapes whose leadership is trusted, whose knowledge is valued, and whose labor is recognized within educational spaces. Participants' stories reveal how anti-Blackness extends beyond student experiences to influence the professional realities and working conditions of Black women educational leaders.

The cumulative effects of these experiences were particularly evident in participants' discussions of wellness and health. One of the most significant findings of this study is that wellness for Black female principals cannot be adequately understood through traditional individualistic frameworks of self-care, resilience, or work-life balance. Existing leadership literature often frames wellness as a personal responsibility, emphasizing stress management, coping strategies, and individual resilience (Allen, 2019; Doan et al., 2022). Participants' narratives complicate these assumptions by demonstrating that their health and well-being were deeply influenced by organizational conditions, institutional expectations, and systemic inequities.

Participants described emotional exhaustion, burnout, isolation, and chronic stress resulting from the demands of leadership. These findings align with literature documenting the disproportionate health risks experienced by Black women educational leaders (Allen, 2019; Beard, 2018; Smith, 2021). Participants' experiences also support scholarship on racialized gender fatigue and racial battle fatigue, which describe the cumulative psychological and physiological consequences of navigating intersecting racism and sexism over time (Ragland Woods et al., 2021). Rather than describing isolated incidents of stress, participants recounted

sustained exposure to conditions that required constant adaptation, emotional labor, and vigilance.

These findings are particularly significant when considered alongside Geronimus et al.'s (2006) concept of weathering, which explains how chronic exposure to racism accelerates physiological deterioration and contributes to adverse health outcomes. Participants' stories of burnout, illness, emotional exhaustion, and boundary-setting suggest that leadership within anti-Black educational systems may function as an additional source of cumulative stress exposure. Blaze's experience leading while undergoing cancer treatment, Sorella's reflections on nearly sacrificing her health to meet leadership expectations, and participants' ongoing discussions of exhaustion illustrate how leadership responsibilities become embodied experiences that affect both physical and emotional well-being.

The findings also support Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2009) critique of the Strong Black Woman narrative. Participants frequently described feeling responsible for carrying the needs of students, staff, families, and communities while simultaneously managing their own challenges. Although participants demonstrated extraordinary resilience, their narratives revealed the costs associated with continually performing strength. The expectation that Black women remain strong, competent, and self-sacrificing often obscured their need for support, rest, and care. Consequently, participants' experiences challenge deficit-oriented narratives that celebrate resilience without interrogating the structural conditions that make such resilience necessary.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this study involves the interconnected nature of health, wellness, and survival. Consistent with the conceptual framework presented in this dissertation, participants' narratives suggest that these concepts are mutually reinforcing rather

than separate experiences. Health reflected the risks and harms associated with chronic stress, racism, sexism, and emotional labor. Survival reflected the strategic actions participants employed to navigate inequitable systems, including boundary-setting, advocacy, mentorship, and resistance. Wellness reflected restorative practices that enabled participants to heal, sustain themselves, and remain connected to their purpose. Together, these dimensions illustrate that leadership sustainability for Black female principals is shaped by the simultaneous realities of harm, healing, and resistance.

From a Black Feminist Thought perspective, these findings are particularly significant. Collins (2000, 2022) argues that Black women's survival has historically depended upon collective knowledge, shared experiences, and communal support systems. Participants' narratives strongly reflected these traditions. Their stories suggest that resilience is not solely an individual characteristic but is cultivated through relationships, spiritual grounding, and collective care. Rather than overcoming challenges in isolation, participants relied upon communities of support that affirmed their identities, validated their experiences, and sustained their leadership.

Ultimately, participants' narratives reveal that healing is not an individual process. Healing occurs through prayer, faith, mentorship, friendship, vulnerability, and community. Although participants faced significant challenges throughout their leadership journeys, they repeatedly returned to the importance of relationships and spiritual grounding as sources of hope, restoration, and strength. These findings suggest that faith, sisterhood, and collective care are not merely coping mechanisms but essential survival strategies that enable Black female principals to continue leading within systems that often require extraordinary resilience.

Finally, participants' narratives demonstrated that survival was not an individual endeavor but a collective process sustained through faith, sisterhood, mentorship, and community. Collins (2022) identifies dialogue, collective knowledge, and caring relationships as central components of Black Feminist Thought. Participants' experiences strongly reflected these principles. Prayer, spirituality, mentorship, friendship, family, and relationships with other Black women emerged as essential sources of support throughout the study. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of spaces where they could be vulnerable, authentic, and understood without explanation.

These findings align with scholarship on counterspaces, collective care, and mentorship among Black women educators (Brock, 2019; Evans-Winters, 2019). Within educational systems that frequently produced isolation and marginalization, participants relied upon relationships to affirm their experiences, share knowledge, and sustain their leadership. Importantly, these practices functioned as more than coping mechanisms. Through a Black Feminist Thought lens, collective care represents a form of resistance that challenges individualistic approaches to leadership and wellness. Participants' stories suggest that healing can occur through connection, shared understanding, and collective affirmation. In this way, faith and community became critical mechanisms by which participants preserved their well-being and continued to lead despite systemic barriers.

The findings of this study reveal that Black female principals do not simply navigate leadership challenges. They navigate anti-Black educational systems that shape their health, wellness, and survival while simultaneously serving students, families, and communities. Their stories challenge dominant narratives of educational leadership by demonstrating that leadership

sustainability cannot be separated from issues of race, gender, power, and well-being. Through practices of care, spirituality, resistance, and collective support, participants created pathways for survival and healing while continuing to advocate for educational equity. These findings contribute to educational leadership scholarship by centering Black women's voices and illuminating the structural conditions that influence not only how Black women lead, but how they survive.

Researcher Positional Reflection

Engaging in this research was both one of the most difficult and one of the most beautiful experiences of my doctoral journey. As a Black woman and current elementary principal, I entered this study with an awareness that I shared many social, cultural, and professional experiences with the participants. Throughout the individual interviews and focus group, I found myself deeply resonating with many of the stories shared by the six Black female principals. Their narratives often reflected realities I had experienced personally, while simultaneously expanding my understanding of the diverse ways Black women navigate educational leadership.

At times, participating in these conversations was emotionally challenging. As participants recounted experiences of racism, sexism, isolation, health challenges, and the sacrifices associated with leadership, I found myself reflecting on similar experiences within my own professional journey. There were moments when I felt sadness, frustration, and even grief as participants described situations that mirrored challenges I had witnessed or experienced myself. Hearing these stories required me to confront difficult realities about the personal and professional costs often associated with leading while Black and female within educational systems.

At the same time, the experience was profoundly affirming and healing. Throughout the interviews and focus group, I experienced moments of connection, validation, and sisterhood. Participants openly shared their stories, offered wisdom, laughed together, reflected together, and created space for honest dialogue about experiences that are often carried silently. There were moments when I cried, laughed, prayed, and reflected alongside participants. The conversations often felt less like traditional research interviews and more like opportunities for collective storytelling, healing, and meaning-making.

One of the most meaningful aspects of this research was the realization that while each participant's journey was unique, there were also significant points of connection across our experiences. As Black women educational leaders, we carried different stories, backgrounds, and leadership contexts, yet many of our experiences overlapped in powerful ways. This intersection of similarity and difference challenged me to remain reflective throughout the research process. There were times when my emotional and physical responses surprised me. Some reactions I immediately understood, while others I am still processing. The research reminded me that shared identity does not eliminate differences in experience, but it can create opportunities for deeper understanding, empathy, and connection.

I am beyond grateful for each participant's willingness to share her story. Their vulnerability, honesty, wisdom, and courage made this study possible. The experience reinforced my belief in the importance of centering Black women's voices and lived experiences within educational leadership research. More importantly, it reminded me that our stories matter. Through this research, I not only gained a deeper understanding of the health, wellness, and survival of Black female principals, but I also experienced the power of collective reflection,

affirmation, and sisterhood. This study became more than a research project; it became an opportunity for connection, healing, and the honoring of Black women's leadership experiences.

Implications

This study extends beyond merely informing educational leadership preparation, district practices, and policymaking; it ultimately holds significant implications for Black women who currently serve as school leaders and those who aspire to step into these roles in the future. Through a rich tapestry of participants' narratives, the research illustrates that leadership and personal wellness are not opposed. Instead, the data reveal that maintaining one's health, nurturing personal identity, embracing faith, and fostering strong community ties are not just secondary pursuits but foundational elements critical to effective and sustainable leadership.

The participants' experiences challenge the prevailing notion that self-care is inconsistent with leadership responsibilities. Instead, this study encourages Black women principals to reconceptualize the prioritization of their well-being. It frames self-preservation not as a retreat from the demands of leadership but rather as a vital act of resistance against systemic challenges, an affirmation of their humanity, and a means of ensuring they can continue to serve their communities effectively. By advocating for this perspective, the study highlights the importance of viewing self-care as an essential strategy for enduring leadership in educational settings.

Implications for Current Black Women Principals

The findings of this study affirm that Black women principals should not interpret the emotional, physical, and psychological challenges they experience as evidence of individual inadequacy or leadership failure. Rather, participants' narratives demonstrate that these experiences are often produced by systemic anti-Blackness, racialized gender expectations, and organizational conditions that place disproportionate emotional and relational demands on Black women leaders. Recognizing these structural realities may help current Black women principals

shift away from internalizing unrealistic expectations and instead acknowledge that many of the challenges they encounter are shared experiences rather than personal shortcomings.

Participants also demonstrated that sustainable leadership requires intentional self-preservation practices. Throughout the interviews, principals described establishing professional boundaries, prioritizing family, seeking therapy, engaging in prayer, exercising, listening to music, cultivating trusted relationships, and protecting time for rest. These practices were not described as luxuries but as necessary leadership strategies that enabled participants to continue serving their students and communities. Current Black women principals may therefore benefit from redefining effective leadership to include wellness as a professional responsibility rather than an afterthought.

Perhaps most importantly, this study highlights the importance of refusing isolation. Participants repeatedly emphasized that healing occurred through authentic relationships with other Black women leaders who understood their experiences without requiring explanation. Building and sustaining networks of mentorship, sisterhood, and collective care may help current Black women principals navigate the complexities of educational leadership while protecting both their professional effectiveness and personal well-being. Leadership, as demonstrated by participants, is most sustainable when Black women intentionally create spaces where they are affirmed, supported, and fully seen.

Implications for Aspiring Black Women Principals

This study offers important insights for Black women who aspire to become school principals. Participants consistently described educational leadership as deeply meaningful work rooted in service, advocacy, and commitment to children and communities. However, they also

emphasized that leadership within public education requires navigating systems that may challenge their authority, question their expertise, and demand extraordinary emotional labor. Aspiring Black women principals should therefore enter leadership with both hope and preparation, recognizing that professional success depends not only on technical leadership skills but also on cultivating practices that sustain personal well-being.

The findings further suggest that aspiring leaders should intentionally develop supportive communities before assuming leadership positions. Participants credited mentors, faith communities, family members, and relationships with other Black women educators as essential sources of encouragement, wisdom, and accountability throughout their careers. Rather than waiting until challenges arise, aspiring principals may benefit from intentionally building these networks early in their leadership journeys. Such relationships can provide guidance during difficult decisions, affirmation during periods of self-doubt, and opportunities for shared learning and professional growth.

Finally, this study encourages aspiring Black women principals to define leadership on their own terms rather than according to dominant leadership norms. Participants consistently rejected the notion that effective leadership requires self-sacrifice, emotional suppression, or being endlessly available. Instead, they demonstrated that authentic leadership can be grounded in cultural identity, spirituality, compassion, vulnerability, and collective care. By embracing their lived experiences, honoring their identities, and prioritizing their own humanity alongside their professional responsibilities, aspiring Black women principals can build leadership practices that are both effective and sustainable.

Conclusion

This study examined how Black female principals navigate leadership, wellness, health, and survival within public school systems shaped by anti-Blackness, racism, sexism, and institutional inequities. Grounded in Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990, 2022), the study illuminated the emotional, relational, spiritual, and embodied dimensions of leadership that are often overlooked within dominant educational leadership scholarship. The findings revealed that leadership sustainability cannot be separated from the structural realities within which Black women lead.

Participants described leadership as meaningful and purpose-driven while simultaneously experiencing emotional exhaustion, physical strain, racialized scrutiny, isolation, and institutional neglect. Although they demonstrated resilience, commitment, and extraordinary leadership, their narratives revealed that survival strategies emerged in response to inequitable organizational conditions rather than sustainable systems of support. The findings challenge race-neutral and gender-neutral approaches to leadership by demonstrating that the burdens Black women carry are deeply shaped by intersecting systems of racism and sexism.

The study further highlights that wellness for Black female principals extends beyond individual self-care practices and must be understood within broader institutional contexts. Participants identified prayer, rest, mentorship, therapy, boundary-setting, collective care, and culturally affirming relationships as essential sources of healing, restoration, and leadership sustainability. These practices functioned not only as mechanisms of personal wellness but also as acts of resistance against systems that normalize Black women's exhaustion and disposability.

Ultimately, this study argues that educational leadership must be reimagined in ways that affirm Black women's humanity rather than depend upon their sacrifice. Black female principals should not be expected to endure racism, sexism, emotional isolation, institutional neglect, and chronic overwork in order to lead effectively. Responsibility for wellness and sustainability must extend beyond individual leaders and be shared by leadership preparation programs, school districts, policymakers, and educational institutions committed to equity.

By centering the voices, wisdom, and lived experiences of Black female principals, this study not only documents institutional harm but also identifies pathways toward healing, transformation, and more humanizing approaches to educational leadership. Participants' narratives challenge scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to move beyond performative commitments to equity and toward systemic changes that genuinely support Black women's wellness, leadership, and success. The findings affirm that survival should not be the expectation for Black women leaders; sustainable success should be.

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Appendix A

Focus group and individual interview questions.

Open-ended interview questions included:

Purpose: To explore shared experiences, collective meaning-making, and common themes related to wellness, health, survival, and leadership among Black female principals working in anti-Black school contexts.

Opening / Warm-Up

1. Introductions

- Who are you?
- How many years have you been in leadership?

2. Community Grounding

- In one word, how would you describe yourself and why?
- In one word, how has leadership affected you? Please explain.

Core Focus Group Questions

3. Racism, Sexism, and Anti-Blackness in School Leadership

- Racism is real. Sexism is real. How has racism and sexism shown up for you as a principal, and how have those experiences shaped your journey within your school and/or district?

4. Survival, Strategy, and Navigation

- When you think about your journey as a principal, what helps you keep going and stay grounded? What keeps you fueled?

Closing Question

5. Collective Support and Connection

- Do you think Black female principals lean on each other when it comes to staying strong in leadership? How have Black female principals shown up for you? How have you shown up for them?

Individual Interview Guide

Purpose: To explore personal narratives related to wellness, health, identity, and survival among Black female principals navigating anti-Black school contexts.

Core Interview Questions

1. Wellness, Health, and Embodiment in Leadership

- How do you define wellness and health when it comes to your role as principal, and what does that look like?

2. Survival, Strategy, and Navigation

- Where do you fully lead? Where you feel safe and at home.

3. Leadership Costs and Sustainability

- What parts of yourself have you had to protect or nurture?

4. Identity, Meaning, and Leadership

- What would you share with policy makers, district leadership, or White people about the real experience of leading schools as a Black woman and why?

Closing Question

5. Healing, Wholeness, and Looking Forward

- How do you heal? What does it look, sound, and feel like?
- Anything else you want to share?

These questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives while encouraging participants to reflect on the intersection of identity, leadership, wellness, health, and well-being.