ABSTRACT


This study was designed to explore the unique perspectives of African-American male principals serving in rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools regarding the residual effects of the North Carolina School Performance Grade Accountability Model and the perceived role that race plays in their recruitment, placement, and retention at certain schools. This study adds to the extant body of literature regarding African-American male principals by examining the issues in a rural context and at the elementary school level, areas in which there is a dearth of research. The lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) was applied to the findings of this study to provide school boards, superintendents, and other district-level individuals who are influential in hiring decisions with valuable insight into the lived experiences of these principals. This investigation was intended to help such individuals uncover potential unconscious biases and covert hiring practices that may influence recruitment, hiring, and placement of African-American males who are currently serving as or aspiring to become principals. Additionally, this study sought to explore the historical landscape and current conditions that have contributed to the underrepresentation of African-American male principals.

by
Kendrick Ray Alston

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Educational Administration and Supervision

Raleigh, North Carolina

2018

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__________________________________________________________
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Dr. Peter Hessling
DEDICATION

First and foremost, I must thank my Lord and Savior for his continued grace and giving me the strength to finish this process. You have reminded me time and time again that all things are possible through you.

To my beautiful wife, the love of my life, words cannot express how much your support and encouragement mean to me. This has been a journey for the both of us, and I could not have made it without you. Thank you for your patience, understanding, and unwavering commitment to helping me achieve this goal.

To my two beautiful princesses, Aaliyah and Zoey, thank you for your inspiration and willingness to allow Daddy to complete the job at hand, and for being so understanding. My hope is that you two achieve even greater heights and use me as an example that anything is possible with hard work, dedication, and faith.
BIOGRAPHY

Kendrick Alston was born and raised in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. He is a product of the Nash-Rocky Mount School System, where he graduated from Northern Nash High School. Kendrick received a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education in 2006 from Fayetteville State University, followed by a Master of School Administration in 2012 from North Carolina State University.

Kendrick began his professional career as a fifth-grade teacher at Princeville Montessori, where he taught Reading, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Shortly after, he transitioned to the Nash-Rocky Mount School System to teach fifth-grade mathematics at Baskerville Elementary. During that time, Kendrick was recognized as the Teacher of the Year for the school as well as the district’s NCCTM Teacher of the Year. Kendrick currently serves as the principal of Williford Elementary School in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and considers it an honor and privilege to serve the community where he was born and raised.

Kendrick is married to the love of his life, Mrs. Lashaunda Alston. They currently reside in Rocky Mount, North Carolina with their two beautiful girls, Aaliyah and Zoey. Mr. Alston enjoys spending time with his family, grilling, reading, and watching his favorite movies.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To say that I had the best dissertation committee would truly be an understatement. I cannot adequately express in words how much I sincerely appreciate all your support and guidance through this journey. Dr. Bass, as my dissertation chair, you worked tirelessly, graciously donating time out of your busy schedule to help me manage this laborious task. You recognized when I needed a kick in the pants to get myself started or to maintain the momentum I was building, and I am very grateful for all you did.

Dr. Ward, thank you for serving as my co-chair and sharing your perspectives and expertise as a former superintendent. The constant check-ins and weekend calls meant more than you can ever know. Your mentorship and professional advice have and will continue to serve me well, just as they will serve the families and students I encounter in my work as a principal.

Dr. Champion, I am grateful for all the expertise and experience you shared with me as a former principal who has served in a high-needs school. Our conversations together were critical in my process as I worked out the most effective way to frame my study.

Dr. Hessling, in addition to your expertise as a researcher, thank you for connecting me to various resources that were critical in assisting me with my study’s design and methodology, including the interview process. These resources were very beneficial for my study and will continue to assist me in my future research endeavors.

To my fellow principal colleagues who participated in this study, thank you for your willingness and courage to share your experiences with me and future readers of this research. I have no doubt other African-American male principals with similar experiences will find comfort in knowing there are colleagues who share comparable stories and feelings.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter Introduction

The principalship is arguably one of the most complex and challenging careers in the American workforce. It often requires the school leader to juggle several things simultaneously, such as managing teachers, assisting with disciplinary issues, responding to parental and community concerns, and more, while working to establish and maintain focus on improving student outcomes. It is perhaps one of the most misunderstood and under-appreciated roles in the education arena (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2008). The work of school principals is also one of the most stressful and emotionally taxing professions in the country, demanding an elevated level of cognitive and emotional maturity to perform the required daily duties (Poirel & Yvon, 2014).

One great challenge facing the American education system is the lack of ethnic diversity in the principalship and teacher workforce. While previous studies have examined the issue of the underrepresentation of persons of color in the principalship, this study focused specifically on the unique perspectives of African-American male principals serving in rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools. To gain a better understanding of the various ways in which increasing accountability for school success has impacted the daily work of these principals, this study explored the impact of controversial models such as North Carolina’s School Performance Grade (NC SPG) Accountability Model. Not only did this study examine the impact of this accountability model on these principals’ careers, it also explored the effect on schools that tend to have higher percentages of students of color and higher percentages of students who qualify for free and/or reduced-priced lunch.

Chapter 1 provides some additional context into the importance of analyzing the racial disparities of the principalship in rural and elementary environments. It also provides critical
background and historical context into the current state of the lack of diversity in the principalship both nationally and within the state of North Carolina. Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as the theoretical framework through which the issue of the underrepresentation of African-American leaders in the principalship was viewed. Two primary tenets of CRT were used as the lens through which the issue of the lack of diversity in the principal was examined. The chapter also offers additional context related to policy and the origin of the A-F grading component of the NC SPG Accountability Model currently used in North Carolina.

**Background of the Study**

Over the course of the past two decades, the demographics of public school students in the United States has experienced a dramatic shift. Communities and states across the nation are becoming more ethnically diverse (Johnson, 2015). Researchers and demographers describe this phenomenon as the “browning” of America. Most of the states that have experienced the fastest growing minority populations tend to be in the southern and western regions of the country (Johnson & Kasarda, 2011). North Carolina is one of the southern states in this category. For the first time in North Carolina’s history, most students in public schools are non-White (Public Schools of NC, 2016b). Some have attributed North Carolina’s increasing diversity to its rapidly increasing Hispanic population, the growing populations of metropolitan cities such as Charlotte and Raleigh, the rising enrollment of minority students in the state’s public colleges and universities and increasing numbers of immigrants moving to the state (Johnson, 2006; Johnson & Karsada, 2011). During the 10-year span from 2006 to 2016, North Carolina saw an 8% increase in the number of public school students who identify as Hispanic. Notably, during this same period, North Carolina experienced a 7% decrease in the percentage of its students in its public schools who identify as African American, as well as a 7% decrease in the percentage of
those identifying as White (Public Schools of NC, 2016b). It also worth noting that 80 of North Carolina’s 100 counties are considered rural, 87 of North Carolina’s 115 traditional K-12 public schools districts (approximately 75%) are in these rural counties, and 40% of the total number of K-12 students attending North Carolina’s public schools live in rural communities (Rural Education Advocacy Day, 2016).

Despite the growing diversity of the North Carolina public school system, there continues to be significant racial inequity among teachers and principals in public schools. Currently in North Carolina, 84% of public school teachers are White (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2016a). Nationwide, the lack of diversity in the principalship is even more pronounced. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), approximately 80% of the nation’s principals identify as White, while about 9% of the remaining 20% identify as African American. Analyzing placement by community type makes evident that African-American principals are less likely to be hired or placed at schools in rural communities; in fact, less than 5% of the 29,520 principals placed in rural schools are African American (NCES, 2013).

In 2014, the Center for American Progress conducted a study to highlight the rate of teacher diversity in every state in the United States, analyzing and reporting the data using the Teacher Diversity Index, a statistical analysis approach that the organization pioneered for use in ranking states on the percentage-point difference between teachers of color and students of color (Boser, 2014). To calculate a state’s index score, researchers subtracted the percentage of non-White teachers from the percentage of non-White students. As evidenced by Table 1.1, the lack of ethnic diversity is a challenge for most states around the country.

Table 1.1 provides an index that ranks states on the percentage-point difference non-White teachers and non-White students, showing the demographic differences between teacher
populations and their student populations in each state (Boser, 2014). For example, to calculate North Carolina’s teacher diversity index, subtract the state’s percentage of non-White teachers (16%) from the percentage of non-White students (47%).

Table 1.1: Teacher Diversity Index, 2014

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»Note: “Non-White” means all populations that are not White, including African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.


Table 1.2 below provides additional insight into the racial composition of teachers in the United States by displaying teacher demographics by race and state (Boser, 2014).
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</table>

»Note: Percentages may add up to more than 100%, as teachers could indicate Hispanic or Latino as their origin separately from other racial designations.

»Note: “Non-White” means all populations that are not White, including African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.

*Columns were combined to suppress data that do not meet Institute of Education Sciences reporting standards.

+Data were suppressed due to failure to meet Institute of Education Sciences reporting standards.


Table 1.3 follows with the student demographics by race for each state (Boser, 2014).

Table 1.3: Student Demographics by Race and State, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Pacific Islander</th>
<th>American Indian/Alaska Native</th>
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### Table 1.3 Continued

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<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-- Not available. # rounds to zero.

»Note: “Non-White” means mean all populations that are not White, including African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.

Despite early obstacles in their quest for racial equality, African Americans made significant gains. The *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision not only had a profound impact on the number of Black children who attended public schools across the nation, but also greatly affected the personal and professional lives of thousands of Black educators and principals in the South. These Black educators were often subjected to institutional structures, both covert and overt, designed to eradicate them from the pages of the nation’s history (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2007). One example during desegregation was the practice of demoting Black principals to undesirable positions, which was common in several southern states. Some of the earliest research on the displacement of Black principals was conducted by Robert Hooker. Hooker’s (1971) study, commissioned by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, revealed some quite disturbing patterns among states in the Deep South. Between 1955 and 1965, states such as Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, Arkansas, and Tennessee experienced a significant decline in the number of Black principals.

Yet few states fired Black principals outright; instead, more subtle and covert practices like displacement and demotions were used to disgrace and shame Black principals until they ultimately felt forced to resign. Tactics like these included moving Black high school principals to elementary schools, placing them back in the classroom as teachers, or relocating them to central administrative offices where they would often serve as the assistant to White supervisors. In several cases, the demotion of a Black principal usually resulted in them working as a janitor or clerk (Anderson, 2009). From 1967 to 1971, the number of Black principals in North Carolina decreased from 620 to 40 (Toppo, 2004), leaving 580 Black principals suddenly finding themselves unemployed or forced into early retirement, and thereby experiencing firsthand the
unintended consequences of school desegregation. The 40 principals who were “fortunate” enough to remain with the school system were, in many cases, subjected to demotions.

The extant body of research on the impact of race in the recruitment, placement, and retention of African-American male principals tends to focus more on schools in the urban setting (Anderson, 2009; Brown & Beckett, 2007; Tillman, 2004) and those at the secondary level (Goode, 2005; McCray et al., 2007). To examine the issue with a wider lens, this study explored the perspectives of African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority North Carolina elementary schools on how race impacts their future career advancement opportunities, placement at certain schools in their districts, and retention as principal in the face of accountability models like the NC SPG initiative.

Statement of the Problem

Relatively few schools in America are led by African-American principals; when they are, they tend to be high-poverty, high-minority schools (Brown & Beckett, 2007). Although North Carolina and many other states around the country have become more ethnically diverse, such a trend is not reflected in the demographics of the principalship. As reflected in Table 1.4, there is a clear underrepresentation of African-American principals in both public and private school settings. Interestingly, as the rates of poverty increase for schools, there appears to be a greater likelihood that a principal of color will be placed at the school.
Table 1.4: Number and Percentage Distribution of School Principals, 2011-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type and Selected School Characteristic</th>
<th>Total Number of Principals</th>
<th>Hispanic, Regardless of Race</th>
<th>White, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Black or African American, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Schools</td>
<td>115,540</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
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<td>All public schools</td>
<td>89,810</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>10.1</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Traditional public school</td>
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<td>7.0</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>9.2</td>
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<td>12,330</td>
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<td>86.1</td>
<td>5.4</td>
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<td>29,520</td>
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<td>90.1</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<td>79.4</td>
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<td>81.1</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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</table>

Percent of K-12 students who were approved for free or reduced-price lunches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total Number of Principals</th>
<th>Hispanic, Regardless of Race</th>
<th>White, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Black or African American, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>91.7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<td>88.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<td>82.4</td>
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<td>75 or more</td>
<td>22,020</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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<td>School did not participate in free or reduced-price lunch program</td>
<td>3,090</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
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</table>

»Note: Adapted from “Characteristics of public and private elementary and secondary school principals in the United States: Results from the 2011-12 schools and staffing survey” by the National Center for Education Statistics, 2013, Washington, DC: United States Department of Education.

Over the course of the past few decades, an increasing number of federal, state, and local reform efforts have sought to infuse more accountability measures for public schools. One of the accountability models that has grown in popularity with many state legislatures over the last five years is related to school performance grades. Currently, at least 17 states have or are developing some form of A-F grading system for their schools (Burnette, 2017). State accountability models
such as North Carolina’s SPG initiative, which places more emphasis on student proficiency rates than student growth, have had an overwhelmingly negative impact on schools that tend to have higher rates of poverty and a higher percentage of students of color. As shown in Table 1.5 below, schools that tend to have higher percentages of poverty not only make up smaller portions of the number of schools that earned SPGs of “A” or “B,” but they also comprise larger portions of schools with grades of “C,” “D,” and “F.” These are often deemed as low-performing schools, and thus subjected to increased public scrutiny and penalties.

Table 1.5: Number and Percent of North Carolina Public and Charter Schools by Letter Grade and School Poverty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Total Number of Schools</th>
<th>Schools with 50% or More Poverty</th>
<th>Schools with Less Than 50% Poverty</th>
<th>Percent Total</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>560</td>
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<td>97.9</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>2,415</td>
<td>1,564</td>
<td>851</td>
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»Note: Adapted from “2013-2014 School Performance Grades for North Carolina Schools” by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015, Raleigh, NC.

An increasing number of educators believe that this accountability model unfairly punishes principals and teachers who choose to serve at these high-needs schools. These types of accountability models often minimize or ignore the social, emotional, environmental, and educational challenges that educators within these types of schools frequently encounter in their quest to improve student outcomes (Burnette, 2017). Showalter, Klein, Johnson, and Hartman
(2017) report that data from the Kids Count Data Center revealed that approximately 34% of Black children and 28% of Hispanic children live in poverty. Over the course of the past 10 years, these numbers have steadily increased. Schools that have higher concentrations of students of color and those living in poverty have even greater needs, making this an alarming trend.

African-American principals who lead high-poverty, high-minority schools must not only combat the internal challenges they encounter within their respective schools and districts if they wish to improve student outcomes, but they must also contend with the external influences that intentionally and unintentionally place additional professional and personal pressures on them. For instance, these principals have historically encountered movies and documentaries in which African-American male principals are portrayed as larger-than-life figures who are able to single-handedly change the trajectory of their students regardless of the circumstances. Visual images in films such as Eric Laneuville’s *The George McKenna Story* (1986) and Michael Schiffer’s *Lean on Me* (1989) covertly and overtly project a misleading message in a narrative that wrongly suggests that the right type of leader can minimize or possibly eliminate the residual effects of poverty for the students they serve (Thomas, 1998). In his groundbreaking study, Gooden (2012) provides a unique perspective of the impact of films such as *Lean on Me* on the public perception of African-American male principals and the pressures these principals experience to live up to the unrealistic expectations placed on them by such films. Gooden (2012) highlights the impact of films such as *Lean on Me* when it came to how African-American males were expected to lead with authority and an iron fist.

Children who reside in high-poverty communities often enter school with early learning deficits that frequently manifest into persistent low student achievement (Atkinson, 2015). Several studies have highlighted the residual effects of poverty on student readiness, student
retention of critical academic content, and early language acquisition; specifically, research has found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often enter school with early learning gaps and deficits that create achievement gaps long before their first encounter with school educators (Brooks, 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995; Jenson, 2009). These students are more likely to experience substandard or unstable housing, inadequate nutrition, neighborhoods/communities with high crime rates, and a lack of access to healthcare (Public Schools First NC, n.d.).

Another challenge facing principals of color is the growing segregation of schools, neighborhoods, and school systems across the country. A 2014 study by The Civil Rights Project found that North Carolina schools have become increasingly segregated in the past 20 years. “Over the last two decades, the share of intensely segregated schools—those that enroll less than 10% White students—has tripled. In 2010, intensely segregated schools accounted for 10% of the state’s schools, up from only 3% in 1989” (Ayscue & Woodward, 2014, p. 3). The study also found that African-American principals lead many of North Carolina’s high-minority, high-poverty schools, which in many cases are historically low-performing and underfunded/under resourced, and experience difficult challenges in terms of student conduct, including disciplinary infractions and incidents of violence. In the face of these great challenges, such schools tend to operate under the belief system that their primary job is to get the students to behave properly and conform to the traditional model of schooling (Ayscue & Woodard, 2014). Job placements like these can have a potentially negative impact on future career advancement opportunities and severely influence how the principals are perceived and evaluated. These principals also deal with the harsh reality of knowing that if they are fortunate enough to make substantial gains in student outcomes at their respective schools, they will most likely be “rewarded” with the opportunity to turn-around another low-performing school (Anderson, 2009).
Policy Context: School Performance Grades

It is widely understood that public schools are under growing scrutiny and pressure to improve student outcomes. In this era of test-based accountability, stakeholders across the country continue to debate the most effective, efficient ways to improve the American education system—debates that can become very contentious and emotional at times. Since the release of the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s 1983 landmark report, the debate around public schools has shifted from a focus on “access for all” to one centered on quality (Graham, 2013). Over the next decades, several reform strategies would be proposed and adopted at the local, state, and federal levels. In addition, the American education system has dealt with increasing regulations because of standardized testing, the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and most recently, the reauthorization of the ESEA known as the Every Child Succeeds Act. These reform efforts have brought more heightened attention to the local, national, and global impact that the quality of the American education system has on the progress of specific subgroups of children, the level of preparedness of students entering college or the workforce, and, overall, the nation’s economic standing in the world (Bishop & Jackson, 2015).

As the debate over how to improve the American education system continues to intensify, there has been an expansion of state and federal school accountability models that are oriented toward student performance. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was such a system. States, too, have their own accountability models, and such systems typically rank schools and students according to performance. Performance criteria often include rating metrics related to proportions of students who are proficient, as well as gains in cohorts and subgroups. One of the accountability models that emerged from this movement has been the adoption of school
performance grades. Florida was the first state to adopt an A-F school rating system as a part of its A+ Education Plan in 1999 (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2016). This was a major education initiative of former Governor Jeb Bush. This accountability system has also been supported and promoted by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), an organization of conservative state legislators from across the country (Wagner, 2015). Since Florida’s adoption of the letter grading system, 15 other states, including North Carolina, have adopted or introduced legislation to implement similar accountability models (Burnette, 2017). These A-F grading systems are often comprised of various data points designed to provide an idea of what school achievement looks like. In its original version, Florida’s A-F grade-based accountability system was based on absolute performance levels of student achievement on state standardized assessments in the areas of writing, reading, and mathematics for six different subgroups: economically disadvantaged, Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian (Strauss, 2013). The following year, the state replaced the criterion. Instead of absolute targets for six subgroups, schools were then required to show a decrease in the proportions of students scoring at Level 1, the lowest achievement level on the state assessment scale, regardless of race or income (Strauss, 2013).

After the 2008 presidential election, it became clear that the political landscape of North Carolina was seeing a dramatic shift. For the first time since the 1976 presidential election, a Democratic presidential candidate received a majority of the popular vote in North Carolina, and thus secured the state’s 15 electoral college votes (Kromm, 2008). However, two years later, the Republican party gained controlled of both the Senate and House of Representatives in North Carolina, another first for the state (Robertson & Baker, 2010). Several bills were soon
introduced that intensified the local and statewide debate about the quality of North Carolina public schools.

In January 2011, the North Carolina General Assembly introduced Senate Bill 795, known as the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2011, with key sponsors including Republican Senate President Tempore Phil Berger, Republican Senator Jerry Tillman, and Republican Senator Dan Soucek. Over the next few years, the original version of this legislation was revised multiple times, eventually leading to the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013. Supporters of the legislation justified its needs by asserting that early literacy is a major area of concern across North Carolina public schools (Stoops, 2015). The bill included several components that had a direct, immediate impact on North Carolina public schools. These included a mandate increasing the number of instructional days on the school calendar by five days, providing early developmental screening and implementing Kindergarten Entry Assessments, implementing the Read to Achieve initiative, eliminating social promotion for third-grade students, and eliminating teacher tenure (Public School Forum of North Carolina, n.d.).

Although teacher tenure was perhaps one of the most controversial components of the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013 (Sims & Burns, 2013), the bill’s introduction of the practice of issuing school performance grades was another highly debated component of the legislation. Based on end-of-year standardized testing results, schools would be assigned letter grades using an A-F grading system. These performance grades were assigned to schools based on two primary dimensions of students’ performance on annual standardized testing: overall proficiency rates and student growth. Initially, these letter grades were required to be posted in every North Carolina public school for all to see, arguably creating another layer of accountability for the schools, but that requirement never came to fruition. The legislation also
required that the school’s annual school report card be sent home to parents, along with a letter informing them of the school’s academic grade. In the original version of this legislation, a 15-point scale was used in assigning school letter grades (Public School Forum of North Carolina, n.d.). In the fall of 2013, the first round of school performance grades was released to schools and the public. As expected, an overwhelming majority of schools that received school performance grades of “D” and “F” were schools that have some of the highest levels of poverty across the state.

North Carolina’s A-F school grading system has drawn both praise and criticism, as have systems like it in other states. Supporters of school performance grades argue that this system of accountability provides clarity and transparency into a school’s effectiveness by making it simple for the average citizen to understand the reporting method (Howe & Murray, 2015). Certainly, the letter grading system is easier to understand than the complicated formulas and algorithms that are often used in the education arena. Another argument from those in favor of school performance grades pertains to giving parents the information they need to provide more input into decisions about their children’s education. These proponents argue that, if parents have the necessary information regarding the overall performance of their child’s school and education experience, they will be more equipped and qualified to make the right decision in their child’s best interests. On the other hand, opponents of the system argue that this type of accountability model unfairly punishes schools that tend to have higher percentages of students in poverty and students of color (Henkel, 2016). When lawmakers and policymakers use a system that neither acknowledges nor recognizes the challenges and gains many of the most fragile schools are making in terms of growth, it paints a gloomy picture of the state of these institutions of learning.
and the quality of education in North Carolina overall. In addition, it totally dismisses the growth these schools often achieve on a year-to-year basis.

**Purpose of the Study**

Schools face a multitude of challenges that can make the work of principals even more difficult, including declining budgets, increased accountability, and teacher shortages (Anderson, 2009). These issues can be even more challenging for African-American male principals, especially those who serve in high-poverty, high-minority rural schools (Henderson, 2015). This is because, in addition to the issues that all schools face, these principals must also contend with realities common in rural communities and districts, such as reduced budgets, geographical and mobility issues, and smaller pools of teacher candidates. Regardless of the community type in which these principals work, African-American male principals continue to encounter challenges and barriers that are often centered on race (Gooden, 2005).

Over the course of the past few years, more attention has been paid to the lack of racial diversity in the principalship. An increasing number of school districts around the country are currently implementing or in the process of developing local and state initiatives designed to increase the number of qualified principal candidates of color (Moss, 2016). While extensive previous research has focused more on the experiences of African-American male principals of high-poverty, high-minority schools in urban settings (Gooden, 2012; Henderson, 2015; Madsen & Mabokela, 2009), the current study instead examined the experiences of principals of such schools in rural settings.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of African-American male principals who lead high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools in rural North Carolina regarding their career advancement. This study also explored African-American
principals’ perspectives regarding the NC SPG Accountability Model to shed light on how, if at all, it directly impacts their work as building-level principals.

As part of the exploration of the current body of knowledge on the topic, this study’s literature review includes an analysis of the societal, historical, and policy factors that have contributed to the underrepresentation of African-American male principals in rural North Carolina school districts. It explores the residual effects of the achievement gap, and how this has contributed to the inadequate supply of Black male administrators. In addition, the literature review discusses key Supreme Court decisions that have negatively and disproportionately affected African-American principals, as well as the impact of internal and external influences that place additional pressures on African-American male principals who serve in rural schools that are high-poverty and high-minority.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What factors have led to the underrepresentation of African Americans in school leadership?

2. How do African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the internal and external factors influencing their decision to apply for or their placement at certain schools?

3. How do African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the impact of their placement on future career advancement?

4. How do African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the pressures that result from the current proficiency and
growth formula of the North Carolina School Performance Grade Accountability Model?

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms are used in this study, and these constructs are essential to understanding the current research. Some terms are defined in order to operationalize them for the study. Other constructs are defined based upon accepted use in the pertinent body of knowledge.

*A-F Accountability Model*: An education accountability model adopted by many states, which assigns schools letter grades (A-F) based on student achievement scores and student growth measures.

*African American*: Citizens of the United States who are non-Hispanic and classified as “Black” by the National Census Bureau, including individuals descending from any of the Black racial groups in Africa. The term is used interchangeably with the term *Black* in this paper.

*Black*: A classification by the National Census Bureau of citizens of the United States who are non-Hispanic, including individuals descending from any of the Black racial groups in Africa. The term is used interchangeably with the term *African American* in this paper.

*Career advancement*: The movement of a principal to a new job that will provide him/her with additional staff and/or students, or the transition of a building-level principal to a district-level position.

*High-poverty school*: Schools in which 50% or more of the total student population receive free and/or reduced-price lunch.

*High-minority school*: Schools in which 50% or more of the total student population identify as African American and/or Hispanic.
**Fit:** A term often used by district hiring personnel to justify their decision to place and/or hire district principals for specific schools.

**Growth:** A statistical component of the Education-Value Added Assessment System that compares a student’s current level of academic performance to his or her projected academic performance to determine if the rating of the student, school, and educator’s performance should be that they exceeded, met, or did not meet expected growth.

**North Carolina School Performance Grade (NC SPG):** The A-F accountability model adopted by the North Carolina legislature, which assigns ratings to schools across the state in the forms of an A-F grading scale.

**Placement:** The practice by school district hiring personnel to place newly hired or current district principals in certain schools.

**Proficiency:** An assessment score in which the student meets at least the minimum standard of mastery to demonstrate the appropriate level of understanding of the grade-level content/curriculum.

**Representation:** A threshold for principals that represents or mirrors the demographics of the state. An underrepresentation represents a quantity that is significantly lower than the proportion of selected demographics of the citizens across the state.

**Rural:** North Carolina school districts not defined as non-rural according to the North Carolina Rural Center. Of the 115 school districts in North Carolina, 87 are in rural counties.

**White privilege:** A tenet of Critical Race Theory and a social ideology that asserts that White citizens in America have been afforded advantages, opportunities, and resources based solely on their skin color.
White supremacy: An historically- and institutionally-based system of exploitation and oppression of peoples of color by White people to maintain systems of power, advantage, and dominance.

Significance of the Study

Designed to add to the extant body of work on how race affects the recruitment, placement, and retention of African-American male principals, the current study explored eight North Carolina principals’ perspectives on the impact of imbalanced accountability models on their schools and students. Previous research has tended to focus on the recruitment, placement, and retention of African-American male principals in urban settings (Gooden, 2012; Henderson, 2015; Madsen & Mabokela, 2009), but there is a dearth of studies on the same issue in rural settings. Therefore, this study was driven by the clear need to examine this topic in the context of rural communities, as well as to explore the potential implications a lack of racial diversity in the principalship could have on the future success and growth of North Carolina schools. It was furthermore important to analyze how accountability models affect African-American male principals who lead high-poverty, high-minority schools.

This study can provide current and future superintendents with a unique perspective of African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools. Current and future African-American male teachers may also find this study’s information beneficial as they consider potential leadership opportunities within the field of education. Moreover, the study can provide district and state policymakers with valuable insights regarding whether future policies need to be developed to put fair and equitable hiring and placement protocols in place for African-American principal candidates to help ensure that these principals are provided with equal opportunities to serve in more diverse schools. From the current study,
policymakers may find a clear rationale to offer additional intensive support for schools with higher rates of poverty.

Finally, policymakers, superintendents, and local Boards of Education can carefully consider the findings of this study to address the shortage of African-American males entering the principalship, the lack of diversity in leadership roles in many North Carolina schools, and the impact of accountability models such as the NC SPG initiative on African-American principals who lead high-poverty, high-minority schools.

**Organization of the Study**

To understand the status of diversity in the principalship in America, and in northeastern North Carolina specifically, it is important to consider and study the role of systematic racism. Such an investigation includes looking at the impact of accountability models such as the NC SPG initiative on principals of high-poverty, high-minority schools and the schools themselves.

Chapter 1 introduced the study’s topic and related concerns that were the impetus for the current research. Chapter 2 follows with a review of relevant literature pertaining to historical factors that have contributed to the underrepresentation of African-American males in the principalship. The literature review describes relevant historical developments as well as the contemporary policy context and provides insight into the theoretical framework through which this topic was explored. Chapter 3 includes details about the research methods employed for this study, and discusses the research design, related protocol, participant selection, and plans for data analysis.

Chapter 4 provides an analysis and results of the study, any valuable insight gained into the lived experiences of African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools, as well as the perceived impact of race on their recruitment, placement, and
retention. These principals’ perceptions of the NC SPG Accountability Model, as well as its impact on their ability to facilitate success in their schools, are shared. Concluding the study, Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the current study’s findings and implications for policymakers, aspiring school leaders, and future researchers.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an introduction and background on the topic of study, and an overview of the theoretical framework in the current study. The policy context was described, with specific focus on the policies associated with North Carolina’s SPG Accountability Model. The research questions that the study addressed were also presented. This chapter also offered justification for exploring the underrepresentation of African Americans in the principalship, and explicitly stated the value of understanding in which these principals seek to help schools and students succeed. The current study can provide current and aspiring African-American leaders with valuable insight into the potential various obstacles and challenges they may encounter on their professional journeys as Black school leaders. Even more, examining the beliefs, perceptions, and experiences of African-American male principals is a vital piece of our nation’s history—and it is also critical to the future success of public schools in many states that have the responsibility of educating increasing numbers of students of color.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Introduction

The purpose of this research is to describe the lived experiences of African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high minority elementary schools, specifically regarding their perspectives of the impact of race on their recruitment, placement, and career opportunities in the field. This chapter explores the historical and contemporary roles of African-American male principals in public education, as well as the role of internal and external influences in shaping public perceptions of African-American males that perpetuates negative stereotypes of these leaders. Additionally, this chapter examines the issue of the underrepresentation of African-American males in the principalship through a historical perspective, paired with a discussion of key factors that have led to their disproportionate placement in high-minority, high-poverty schools.

This chapter is organized in four sections. The first section provides a historical overview of the role that media has played in shaping the perceptions of African-American males through negative imagery and propaganda. It is followed by an examination of the plight of early Black principals and the critical role of these leaders in shaping education for Black citizens. The third section of the chapter highlights key Supreme Court decisions that have had a direct impact upon the professional lives of Black educators around the country, specifically Black principals. The fourth and concluding section provides an overview of the theoretical framework used in the current study to explore the issue of the underrepresentation of Black principals in greater depth.

Previous studies have explored the disproportionate placement of African-American male principals in high-minority, high-poverty schools (Black, 2012; Fiore & Curtin, 1997; Gooden, 2012; Henderson, 2015; Jones & Montenegro, 1985; Moultry, 2014). Many of these studies have
highlighted the mutual benefits and positive impact that school leaders of color tend to have in building connections with students and the communities in which they serve. These leaders often view the work of educating students of color as a moral responsibility, as well as an opportunity to reinforce the importance of self-pride, community, and cultural awareness among the diverse student population (Gooden, 2012).

**Race and Mainstream Media**

**Historical Perspective**

The quote that reads, “The media’s the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that’s power. Because they control the minds of the masses” is often attributed to Malcolm X. Indeed, media includes all print, audio, and visual content shared with the masses, and advertising companies, politicians, and special interest groups around the world have long understood the power that imagery has in influencing public behavior and opinion. Mental images can often conjure up emotions, influence perceptions, and ultimately drive behaviors. Some researchers thus argue that the negative depiction of African-Americans in mainstream media has had a profound impact on their treatment by American society, especially the treatment of African-American men (Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram, & Platt, 2011; Wilson, 2006). Such a depiction may arguably be what is influencing the existing pattern of principal selection in which African-American male principals tend to get hired and placed at certain types of schools, as African-American males who are perceived as non-threatening tend to have more opportunities to lead more diverse schools (Madsen & Mabokela, 2009).

In the era of motion pictures, there have been several movies, documentaries, and publications that have depicted African-American males in a negative light. One of the earliest
and most influential films created is D.W. Griffiths’ 1915 work, *The Birth of a Nation*. In this American movie, African Americans were portrayed as second-class citizens who represented an imminent threat to the established system of White supremacy and who, as such, needed to be controlled by White America. Although this film primarily focuses on the events that led to the start of the Civil War and the Reconstruction period, it also covertly and overtly sent very disturbing messages to the American public about a purported new potential “threat” to White America. African-American men were depicted in the film as evil villains whose sole purpose was to rid the new South of all White citizens and steal their most prized possessions, the White American woman; an example is found in one scene, in which a former slave by the name of Gus attempts to chase down and rape a White woman by the name of Flora (Griffith, Dixon, & Triangle Film Corporation, 1915). This film, interestingly, would be used years later by the Ku Klux Klan as a tool to recruit potential Klan members—a fact that speaks volumes about its negative representation of African Americans.

When negative images of African-American males are consistently portrayed in American society, they are likely to have an impact on how the viewer perceives and ultimately feels about the people and events on the screen (Glanz, 1997). In this way, media and mass communication are often used to sway viewers to think, feel, and act in a certain manner. Over the course of American history, African-American males have been far too often portrayed as sub-human, capable of unspeakable acts of violence, without rights to property, and even as silly cartoonish creatures with exaggerated features such as large red lips, bulging eyes, and child-like vocabulary. Black men have also been portrayed as wild creatures (often referred to as “Buck” or “Sambo”), an insinuation that they are sexual beasts that threaten the safety of American White women. The “Buck” or “Sambo” image was strong and aggressive, a sexual stereotype combined
with animalistic traits associated with the Black slave that served as the White man’s nightmare (Wilson, 2006). These images not only sought to display African Americans in undesirable ways, but they sought to reinforce the idea of White supremacy.

**Contemporary Perspective**

During the eight years of President Barack Obama’s presidency, many filmmakers and Black activists begun to bring national attention to the increasing number of slavery-themed movies and documentaries. These include movies such as *Aferim!* and *12 Years a Slave*, and a modern version of the classic and television series *Roots*. One of the most controversial movies released during this time was Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*. This movie followed an ex-slave in his journey to retrieve his wife from one of the most notorious slave owners in the South and included several scenes in which African Americans were treated as animals and the “N” word was used multiples times (Tarantino et al., 2013). One of the most vocal critics of this movie was director Spike Lee, who told *VibeTV* that the movie was “disrespectful to [his] ancestors” (Platton, 2012, n.p.). Despite the film’s controversial theater release, however, it saw domestic and international success at the box office, grossing $320 million.

In 1988, mainstream America was introduced to one of the most polarizing and controversial figures in American education history: Principal Joe Clark. The cover of *Time* magazine featured a picture of him holding a baseball bat and a caption that reads, “Is Getting Tough the Answer? School principal Joe Clark says yes—and critics are up in arms” (Miller, 2011). In the popular 1998 movie, *Lean on Me*, actor Morgan Freeman portrays the role of this no-nonsense principal attempting to turn-around one of the lowest performing schools in the Paterson, New Jersey school district. Upon his arrival to Eastside High, Principal Joe Clark began his first staff meeting by informing everyone that his word is law, as he would not be there
if they knew how to run the school; he was sent to Eastside High to transform the culture of the school and stop the potential takeover of the school by the state government. Such an image of Mr. Clark as the ultimate authoritarian and domineering figure is depicted in a number of scenes throughout the film (Twain, 1998). Yet, there were many in the Black community who believed that this movie presented the wrong image of African-American male principals. Many asked whether a principal like Mr. Clark would have been hired to lead a predominantly White school, and if he would have been allowed to employ the same tactics in his school reform efforts (Glanz, 1997).

Recently, a growing number of movies and documentaries have attempted to depict African-American male principals in a more positive light. Documentaries such as CNN’s Black in America, Oprah Winfrey’s Blackboard Wars, and Guggenheim’s Waiting for Superman have been effective in helping to change the narrative of the Black principal. These films, in direct contrast to the previously discussed Lean on Me, portray African-American male principals with strong leadership skills, demonstrating a spirit of genuine care and love for their students and staff while still fostering a culture of elevated expectations. Unfortunately, these types of films do not typically generate the same amount revenue or public interest that is created by their counterparts.

The Evolution of the Black Principal (1863-1954)

To gain a better understanding of the plight and journey of African-American male principals in this country, it is important to first recognize the various historical factors that have greatly influenced and shaped the current conditions over time. The immediate aftermath of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation left an overwhelming number of ex-slaves suddenly finding themselves thrusted into unfamiliar and uncharted territory. For the first time in
their history in America, these newly freed citizens would have opportunities, though limited, that had never been available before. Not only did these citizens desire short-term goals such as ensuring they were able to meet some of their most basic needs, but they also strived for the long-term goal of true equality in this new America. For true social and economic advancement to occur, there had to be an intense and strategic focus on equipping Black citizens with the tools to thrive. To this end, leaders within the Black community quickly recognized the critical role that education would play in improving the lives and opportunities for many Black citizens, as well as the importance of their role as leaders of the movement to ensure that the Black community was equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to compete and survive in the world. Due to the lack of schools for Black children and ex-slaves in the South, Freedmen’s schools were established in 1865. These schools were led by Black teachers and leaders who sought to address the immediate needs of its people, while simultaneously challenging the structures of White supremacy and institutional racism. As Anderson (1988) stated:

The short-range purpose of Black education in the post-slavery era was to provide the masses of ex-slaves with basic literacy skills plus the rudiments for participation in a democratic society. The long-range purpose was the intellectual and moral development of a responsible leadership class that would organize the masses and lead them to freedom and equality. (p. 31)

These principals served as central figures in both the school and the community. They worked to build a coalition of fellow educators who would take on the great responsibility of educating Black children and were critical in securing funding and other needed resources for these schools. Some of the earliest leaders in the education of Black youths and adults came from the
church. These ministers and pastors would often open their doors to all Black citizens, regardless of their denomination or church affiliation (Meier, 1963).

The course of the next few years would reveal a steady increase in the number of Black leaders, and these leaders would begin to gain state and national prominence in the education arena. Figures such as Booker T. Washington, Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Jackson Coopin, and Daniel Payne would begin to change the landscape of education for Black children and adult ex-slaves. Siddle Walker (2003) emphasized the importance of the cultural perspectives of the Black principal, writing, “The perspective of the Black principal is central to explaining how the segregated Black schools were able to fight the demon of racism by helping Black children believe in what they were capable of achieving” (p. 59). For many, the Black principal served as the linchpin of the Black community and a voice for the voiceless (Tillman, 2004).

**Jim Crow Era – Historical Context (1877-1950)**

After the Reconstruction period, segregation laws were established in the south to keep Black and White citizens separate from one another. This system of laws was known as “Jim Crow,” a term firmly based on racist ideas:

The term “Jim Crow” originated in minstrel shows, the popular vaudeville-type traveling stage plays that circulated the South in the mid-nineteenth century. Jim Crow was a stock character, a stereotypically lazy and shiftless black buffoon, designed to elicit laughs with his avoidance of work and dancing ability. (Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, n.d., n.p.)

The Jim Crow era marked one of the ugliest and darkest times in American history—and witnessed the legitimization of anti-Black racism (Gooden, 2012). During the Jim Crow era,
African Americans, especially males, were typically depicted and treated as second-class citizens:

The Jim Crow system was undergirded by a number of incorrect beliefs or rationalizations, such as: Whites were superior to Blacks in all important ways, including but not limited to intelligence, morality, and a civilized behavior; sexual relations between Blacks and Whites would produce a mongrel race which would destroy America; treating blacks as equals would encourage interracial sexual unions; any activity which suggested social equality encouraged interracial sexual relations; and, if necessary, violence must be used to keep Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. (Durant, 2015, p. 178)

According to Brooker (2014), the social mores and legal statutes of Jim Crow were grounded in the belief that the system of White supremacy must be maintained at all costs. He argues that, to truly understand the system of Jim Crow, it is important to analyze the system through its five parts, which he refers to as “pillars.” These five pillars are economic oppression, political oppression, legal oppression, social oppression, and personal oppression (Brooker, 2014).

In schools during the Jim Crow era, Black students and teachers were often subjected to substandard conditions in overcrowded classrooms. These classrooms were typically housed in school buildings that were under-resourced, underfunded, and poorly maintained. Through their adoption of certain policies, White local school boards across the South sent the message that they did not believe that the education of Black citizens was a necessity nor a priority for local communities (Irons, 2002). Those who were fortunate enough to receive some type of formal schooling were often reminded of the harsh realities of White supremacy. Black children were routinely pulled out of school to fulfill the duties and responsibilities of the farms belonging to White landowners. Even the start date of rural schools was often scheduled around the cotton
growing seasons to ensure that adequate field hands—in other words, Blacks—were available to tend to the land.

Despite the various challenges Black citizens encountered during the Jim Crow era, some gains were made by Black students and the community overall. Among the biggest gains was the dramatic increase in the literacy rate of African-American students. Several scholars attribute this to not only the increased access to more schooling, but also to the bonds and the “village mentality” many members in the Black community took in educating their young people (Bizzell & Creighton, 2010; Brooks, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This increase in the literacy rate among Black citizens also marked a pivotal turning point in the shifting focus of Black scholars across the Deep South, as an increasing number of Black scholars after the Reconstruction period believed that the only way Black people could truly be liberated and successful was via education to ensure they had the knowledge and skills to compete in the labor force. One of the most influential scholars during this era was Booker T. Washington. After being encouraged by local Whites, Washington opened a school for Blacks in Alabama in 1881. His goal was to train his students to become teachers, so that they could return to their respective communities and reinvest the knowledge and skills they acquired to help other Blacks flourish (Meier, 1963).

The Legal Fight for Racial Equality

During the post-World War II era, Black leaders sought to obtain racial equality through education, and they recognized the critical role that the judicial system would play in their quest for racial equality. Several states in the South responded to the political and financial blow delivered by the Emancipation of Proclamation by beginning to introduce and pass legislation designed to keep these newly freed slaves in their current economic and social status. These laws were also designed to maintain the system of White supremacy. During the next few years, the
Supreme Court would begin to play a more critical role in improving the opportunities and providing additional legal protections to African-American citizens.

**Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)**

During the height of the Jim Crow era, there were several actions Black citizens took to resist the harsh realities of segregation. States across the nation, especially in the Deep South, adopted laws that were designed to separate the races. In 1890, the state of Louisiana passed legislation that prohibited Blacks from riding in the same railcars of Whites, known to Louisianans as the Separate Car Law (Kennedy, 1990). Homer Plessy challenged Louisiana’s segregation by refusing to move from a “Whites-only” railcar, for which he was arrested and charged with breaking the Separate Car Law. The case would eventually go to the Supreme Court, resulting in a 7-2 ruling that the state of Louisiana was within its right to support laws that required Blacks and Whites to be separated. This landmark decision upheld the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of “separate but equal.” Black school leaders and teachers were not allowed to teach in White-only schools, nor were Black students allowed to attend these schools (Bizzell & Creighton, 2010). This system of segregation reinforced White America’s belief that Blacks lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to teach White children and did not even have the right to do so (Echols, 2006). Some assert that this hidden belief and fear still prevents many African-American principals from attaining positions at schools that may possess a higher percentage of White students (Wilson, 2006).

Despite the fundamental premise of “separate but equal,” schools for Black children and White children were anything but equal. Schools that predominantly served African-American children were typically underfunded and subjected to substandard conditions. Black educators
who served in these schools were paid far less than their White counterparts working in predominantly White schools. Although the disparities in funding for Black schools and White schools were influential in many sectors of the school community, this inequality was often viewed as part of a more strategic and sinister intention of maintaining the system of White supremacy. Some researchers argue that school segregation inflicted a psychological wound in African-American children that reaches far beyond the scope of funding and access disparities (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Reardon, 2016; Siddle Walker, 2000). Black children were made to believe that they were inferior to their White peers and did not deserve the same opportunities. Supporters of racially segregated schools and communities understood early on that, if they had any shot of maintaining the practice and legalization of segregation, citizens of color had to believe that segregation was in their best interests (Adair, 1984).

**Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)**

In the 1954 landmark case *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, the Supreme Court ruled that state laws establishing separate public schools for Black and White children were unconstitutional. The decision changed the landscape of American public education and challenged the established system of institutional racism. Many school districts across the nation, especially in the Deep South, resisted the integration of their public schools, believing doing so threatened the system that they had fought for so many years to establish and maintain. The champions and activists for school integration could not anticipate the negative implications it would have on the professional lives of African-American principals. Over the next few years after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, many African Americans in leadership roles suddenly found themselves without a job (Oakley, Stowell, & Logan, 2009). African-American principals who oversaw predominantly Black schools frequently lost their jobs to White
administrators when school integration finally took place in southern states (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2005; Oakley et al., 2009; Ogletree, 2005). In the 1970s, African-American principals who retained their leadership position were relocated to large school systems with high concentrations of African-American students (Anderson, 2009). Those who were not retained were often demoted or fired, which typically occurred in four categories. These included demoting Black principals to teaching or non-teaching positions, downgrading their schools to lower grade levels that frequently affected their salary due to reduced staff members, and allowing them to retain their title but with limited power, as well as giving them “paper promotions” to central office positions where they had no influence (Anderson, 2009).

A growing number of southern states would begin to hear legal arguments over the next years by many in the White establishment who sought to minimize the impact of Black educators, especially Black principals. They argued that Black principals had been ineffective in educating Black children and thus needed to be replaced by more competent White principals (Tillman, 2004). These testimonies all but guaranteed that the system of segregated schools would continue, hence the professional and personal lives of Black principals would be forever changed (Brown, 2005).

Civil Rights Act, Title VI (1964)

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 barred discrimination based on race in the areas of public accommodation, schools, libraries, museums, and hospitals. It was the first federal statute to deal a decisive blow to the Jim Crow era by finally creating a financial impetus for change—that is, schools refusing to desegregate did not receive federal funding (Milhiser, 2014). Black leaders in the tradition of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B DuBois increasingly saw education as a path towards civil rights and chose to make it and the legal system the centerpiece of their activist
strategy (Johnson & Watson, 2004). The following years revealed the economic and employment impact of the Civil Rights Act across the nation. South Carolina, for example, saw a 15% increase in the number of Black textile workers from 1964 to 1970 (Black, 2012), which resulted in improvement of incomes and living standards for Blacks. Despite these gains in other industries around the country, however, the number of African-American principals remained stagnant and even decreased significantly in many states. Between the years of 1964-1974, the number of African-American principals increased slightly from 4% to 5% (NCES, 2013).

Because of the newly granted legal protections afforded by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the unemployment rate of African Americans began to decline. Some argue that even with the additional protections provided by the Civil Rights Act, many schools and local communities around the country focused much of their attention on simply complying with its various requirements and guidelines rather than facilitating deep integration (Aimin, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Kluger, 2004). Greene (2015) writes in detail about the short- and long-term implications of federal interventions such as 1954’s Brown vs. Board of Education ruling and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. For many African-American school leaders, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 presented the illusion that they would be afforded an equal opportunity to serve as the heads of increasingly diverse schools around the county. Greene (2015) addresses the issue of desegregation versus integration:

Integration is the active acceptance of desegregation and the encouraged participation of all groups and communities in its institutions…Desegregation is a short-range goal while integration is the primary goal of true democracy. So, as educational leaders and policy workers pursue the important task of respecting the letter of the law, (i.e., compliance with
segregation decisions, they must also respect the spirit of the law (i.e., commitment to the democratic principles of integration). (p. 384-385)

Thus, it is critical that current and aspiring African-American principals focus their collective energies on not only helping to create opportunities for themselves to lead more diverse schools, but also working to ensure that deep integration becomes the focal point of their efforts to change the current system.

**Pertinent Research and Professional Perspectives**

Systematic and pervasive racism has a profound effect on human interactions and perceptions, as well as a psychological effect on the victims of racism and the perpetrators of discriminatory practices. In the 1940s, psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark designed and conducted a series of experiments, known colloquially as “the doll tests,” to study the psychological effects of segregation on African-American children. Notably, the Clarks’ research would later be a part of the testimony in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court proceedings (Sharpe, 2014). They used four dolls, identical except for color, to test the racial perceptions of children between the ages of three and seven. After being asked to identify both the race of the dolls and which color doll they preferred, most of the children preferred and assigned positive characteristics to the White doll (Sharpe, 2014). The Clarks concluded that “prejudice, discrimination, and segregation” created a feeling of inferiority among African-American children and damaged their self-esteem and self-image (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, n.d.). Some scholars have argued that these children held on to these deep-rooted beliefs as they grew into adulthood, and ultimately passed them, whether directly or indirectly, to their offspring (Anderson, 2009; Black, 2012; Creighton & Bizzell, 2010). These children grew up feeling as though they did not belong with Whites; hence, those who became
principals may have lacked the confidence to lead racially diverse schools. This resulted in what some have argued is one of the influential factors that contributed to the achievement gap between White students and those of color (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

As a part of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a study was commissioned to examine the lack of equal opportunities by reasons of race, color, religion, or national origin in public education. The 1966 Coleman Report, entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, looked at the issues of school equality and strategies that were more likely to equalize educational opportunities for poor minority students, including compensatory education and school integration. The study concluded that most children attended schools where almost all students were of the same race. While there were minimal gaps in spending or resources among White schools, and likewise among Black schools, there were significant gaps in spending between White schools and Black schools. Coleman (1966) concluded that student achievement was unrelated to the measures of school resources, yet strongly related to family background and race/socioeconomic status of peers.

Principals who can make a cultural connection to students tend to be viewed by their students as allies rather than adversaries (Brooks, 2012; Brown, 2005). Dee and Penner (2016) examined the impact of a principal who understands the culture of the student body and student achievement, using both qualitative and quantitative data to show that a culturally relevant school environment can help reduce dropout rates for at-risk students. Principals who are responsive to the cultural needs of their students and establish a culture built on respect, empathy, and equity, tend to build student motivation and stronger student relationships that often become very pervasive throughout the school community (Dee & Penner, 2016).
Wilson (2006) interviewed several Black male school administrators in Michigan school districts to study the factors that contributed to their success. She found that a connection to the community; the support of colleagues, families, and higher administration; and access to adequate resources are important to their success. These principals viewed their work of improving outcomes for their students as both a professional and personal responsibility, especially for those of color and from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Also, because such principals tend to relate to the experiences of students of color, they are more driven to minimize and alleviate the impact of barriers such as systematic racism and income inequalities (Wilson, 2006). Wilson’s (2006) study also examined the lack of diversity in the appointment of principals, identifying several external contributing factors. These include negative stereotypes and historical depictions of African-American males, the school-to-prison pipeline that overwhelmingly affects minorities more than other communities, educational factors such as the achievement gap, the number of students of color that are expelled and/or suspended, limited access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses and gifted programs, and the decreasing number of African Americans entering the teaching profession.

**Underrepresentation of African-American Principals**

Throughout the nation’s history, the depiction of African Americans in mainstream media, especially Black males, has greatly distorted American society’s perception of these people and their contributions to our culture (Gooden, 2012). African-American males were depicted for years as aggressive, subhuman beasts who possess a deep, hidden thirst for White women and represented a threat to the American way of life. This, along with other factors, may contribute to local school boards and superintendents being apprehensive about hiring African-American male principals for certain schools.
In a 2017 study, researchers found that during the 12-year span of 2001-2013, the racial/ethnic makeup of North Carolina school principals remained steady, with about 75% of these administrators identifying as White. During this same period, the number of principals who identified as African American stayed around 22%, and the racial/ethnic demographics of students was largely unchanged. The percentage of both American Indian and Asian students remained at around 1.4%, Blacks decreased from 32% to 26%, Hispanics increased from 4.3% to 14.3%, and Whites decreased from 62% to 51.9%. Combined, individuals of color represent approximately half of the total student demographics in North Carolina, but only a quarter of the principal demographics. White principals represent three quarters of the principalship, while White students make up approximately 50% of the public-school student population (Osborne-Lampkin & Folsom, 2017). A study by the United States Department of Education (2016) found that in 2012, 80% of the nation’s public-school principals identified as White and merely 10% as African American. For private schools, the numbers were just as disproportionate, with 87% of private school principals identifying as White in 2012 and only 7% as African American (United States Department of Education, 2016).

There are obvious racial disparities within the principalship and the potential limited opportunities that aspiring principals of color may be afforded. This may be one of the primary reasons that many districts and states across the country are experiencing declining numbers of African Americans entering the principalship and other educational leadership positions (Brooks, 2013; Bundy, 2008; Echols, 2006). Some have suggested that this level of ethnic inequity in the principalship is unsurprising (Anderson, 2009; Black, 2012), specifically due to the systemic and pervasive racism that African Americans in this country have experienced in both the public and private sectors for centuries (Bizzell & Creighton, 2010; Black, 2012; Brooks, 2013).
Nationally, the number of African-American principals compared to White principals is significantly disproportionate, regardless of school classification, community type, school level, or student enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). As indicated in Table 1.4 below, during the 2011-2012 academic year, there were an estimated 115,540 principals of K-12 schools in the United States. Of these principals, 89,810 worked in a public school and 25,730 worked in a private school. Among the principals at public schools, 80% were non-Hispanic White, 10% were non-Hispanic Black or African American, 7% were Hispanic, and 3% were another race/ethnicity. Among private school principals, 87% were non-Hispanic White, 7% were non-Hispanic Black or African American, 3% were Hispanic, and 3% were another race/ethnicity. Further data analysis shows that African-American principals are disproportionately hired to lead schools with higher percentages of minority students and of students receiving free/reduced-price lunch. Due to these hiring practices, African-American principals working in these schools are more likely to be viewed as “ineffective” and incapable of creating the conditions to boost student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

The literature synthesized in this section provides underpinning to support Research Question 1’s assertion that African Americans are indeed underrepresented among the population of principals. Through the lens of the theoretical framework, the next section examines the issue of the underrepresentation of African-American principals and the impact that race plays in their recruitment, placement, and retention. The section also explores the degree to which historically negative perceptions of African-American males and their leadership capabilities remain an active part of the thought patterns of decision makers regarding their placement as principals.
The Principalship in a Rural Context

A substantial portion of North Carolina students attend schools in rural communities. Forty percent of students in the state’s traditional K-12 public schools reside in rural communities (Showalter et al., 2017). Rural schools and communities are typically classified or designated as rural by factors such as population and the area’s distance from major urbanized centers or clusters. Because of the geographical isolation these schools and communities may experience, they tend to face challenges that are exacerbated by the rural context.

Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of research on rural principals and concluded that principals in rural communities are often expected to engage in multiple dimensions of community life, interface with community organizations and attend community events, and enjoy diminished expectations of privacy. They claim, “Research shows that rural principals who recognize and support this intimate school community bond are more likely to be successful” (Preston et al., 2013, p. 3).

Student achievement, on average, is lower in rural schools than it is in urban/suburban schools (Preston et al., 2013), and there are typically higher rates of chronic absenteeism and poverty among students. Yet there are fewer wraparound support services for these rural students or their communities. A study conducted by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) working with the Rural School and Community Trust concluded that students living in rural communities often face challenges such as limited access to advanced coursework, medical care, adequate food, and employment opportunities (AASA, 2017).

Principals in these types of high-needs, rural schools are expected to lead the daunting task of improving student achievement with fewer resources and human capital (Edmonds, 2017). They not only have fewer opportunities for professional development and networking
than their urban/suburban counterparts, but they are also limited in the degree to which they can provide such opportunities to their faculties (Preston et al., 2013). These principals are often not provided with the same levels of compensation that principals who serve in more urban communities tend to enjoy. Due to the reduced amounts of local funds that can be generated by rural communities, local supplements to teachers and principals are significantly lower. Principals who lead schools in rural communities are expected to take on extra duties such as assisting with the overall maintenance of the school building, supervision of the students, and leading curriculum and professional development for their teachers (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Preston et al., 2013).

Schools in rural districts often experience additional challenges with recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers and principals, because a school administrator must carefully weigh the impact of a rural principalship on his/her career. Since recruitment can be more difficult, the most prevalent reason given by rural school principals for their being in such a role is that they were invited to apply or were appointed. Principals who are newcomers to a rural community are more likely to be viewed as outsiders (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). Because of these and other challenges placed on rural principals, they are less likely than their principal colleagues in urban schools to stay in these schools or even remain in the profession (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014).

**Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory**

For this study, Critical Race Theory (CRT) served as a theoretical framework through which I examined the impact of institutional racism on the lived experiences of African-American principals. CRT is a framework that can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and
discourses (Yosso, 2005). The plight of the African-American principal is one that is rooted in social justice and is critical to the fundamental principles of contemporary education (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). CRT was applied in this study to examine the influence racism has had in shaping policies and many social practices in the American education system.

CRT was developed during the mid-1970s as a response to the failure of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) to adequately address the effects of race and racism in United States jurisprudence (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). As Gordon (1990) wrote, “CLS is a leftist legal movement that challenged the traditional legal scholarship focusing on doctrinal and policy analysis” in favor of a form of law that spoke to the specificity of individuals and groups in social and cultural contexts (p. 15).

Early scholars of CLS believed that the unequal treatment of people of color, especially African Americans, could be best addressed through close examination of policies and legislation with the potential to directly impact social, cultural, financial, and other norms of American society (Theoharis, 2007). Many African Americans in the early 1970s were distressed by the slow pace of racial reform in the United States, after experiencing the era of the mid- to late-1960s during which African Americans, especially in the South, were subjected to unequal treatment and the harsh day-to-day realities of the Jim Crow era. This period of slow reform in the Jim Crow era led CLS scholars and Civil Rights activists across the nation to seek other measures to address the residual effects of covert and overt racism in America (Theoharis, 2007).

CRT initially developed from the work of legal scholars Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richardo Delgado (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The CRT framework has theoretical underpinnings embedded in the lived experiences of people of color, and it challenges the notion of White privilege (Tate, 1997). Scholars of CRT argue that race influences every aspect of
American society; thus, until Americans can acknowledge its influence, meaningful change cannot occur. Bell (1993) argues that racism is a permanent fixture of American culture, and as such people of color will continue to experience the negative effects of race and the stereotypes which are often attached. CRT is shaped by five essential tenets: Counter-Storytelling, Permanence of Racism, Whiteness as Property, Interest Convergence, and Critique of Liberalism. This study investigated the issue of the recruitment, placement, and retention of African-American male principals through the lens of two prominent components of CRT: the tenet of the Permanence of Racism and that of Interest Convergence, which were selected due to the deep-rooted historical legacy of racism in this country and its profound impact on the careers of African-American male principals. This background also provides additional insight into how the structure of the education system contributed to the mass exodus and displacement of Black principals, and how White principals benefited from this dynamic.

**Permanence of Racism**

One fundamental tenet of CRT is the Permanence of Racism. Delgado (1995) claimed that CRT begins with the notion that “racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society (p. xiv), and Ladson-Billings (2003) adds that “because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture” (p. 8-9). Scholars of CRT argue that racism has been a part of American history since its inception. Systems such as Jim Crow laws and legal rulings like *Plessy v. Ferguson* perpetuated the beliefs that African Americans were to be treated as second-class citizens, going so far as to make it socially and legally acceptable (Kennedy, 1990). To address this, there has been growing research in the field of education that is beginning to examine the role that race plays in various aspects of the American education system (Brooks, 2013; Elliot, 2013; Gooden, 2012). These include issues
related to school funding, student suspension, underrepresentation of students of color in advanced courses, graduation rate of students of color, and the lack of diversity in the American education system.

Many scholars believe that the historically negative presumptions about the leadership capabilities of African-American principals continue to greatly influence the thought patterns of decision makers regarding placing these administrators in schools (Henderson, 2015; Madsen & Mabokela, 2009; McCray et al., 2007; Tillman, 2004). Recent data collected from one southeastern state reveal a tendency to place African-American principals in mostly urban, segregated, and underfunded schools (McCray et al., 2007), schools which are often faced with challenges that reach far beyond the scope and parameters of the school building. Such principals are not only expected to lead the academic transformation of the school, but also to address community issues such as poverty, crime, and employment (Echols, 2006). Currently, the placement of African-American principals implicitly suggests that African Americans can only lead and be effective in schools that are predominately Black, while White administrators can lead either type of school, those with a majority of Black or White students. These beliefs often create covert and/or overt systems and practices that work to funnel current and aspiring Black principals to regional and local communities (Tillman, 2004).

**Interest Convergence**

Another critical component of CRT is Interest Convergence, a theoretical construct based on the premise that African Americans can successfully assimilate to White-American culture, if and only if it is in the direct interest of Whites (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Bell (1980) suggests that civil rights gains within communities of color, specifically those for African Americans, should be interpreted with measured enthusiasm. He argues that key rulings such as *Brown vs.*
Board of Education were ultimately decided as much to help Whites as Blacks, because they would create opportunities for White school leaders when high number of African-American principals were displaced due to school integration. Indeed, when school integration finally took place in southern states, African-American principals who oversaw predominantly Black schools were the ones who usually lost their jobs to White administrators (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2005; Ogletree, 2005). Those who were not relieved from their duties often found themselves demoted to positions with no real authority.

CRT scholars argue that aspiring African-American principals today continue to face challenges like those encountered by their predecessors, as they continue to find themselves in situations in which race may be the deciding factor in their placement in American schools, especially in predominantly White schools (Brown, 2005; Tillman, 2003; Valverde, 2003). This type of practice is not only discouraging to current African-American principals, but it also sends a message to teachers who may be considering a career as a school principal—one that suggests that, no matter how intelligent and prepared these potential leaders are, certain opportunities will not be afforded to them. The struggle to get more African Americans entering administrative preparation programs parallels their struggles to pursue and fit into an educational system that has throughout history placed barriers and obstacles in front of them (Sanchez, Thornton, & Usinger, 2009). It is critical that current African-American leaders and aspiring leaders are afforded with opportunities to engage in rich and meaningful experiences that will further enhance and develop their leadership skills (Sutton & Terrell, 2009).

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter has provided a preliminary review of literature on the current topic of study. Race, mainstream media, and the history of the Black principal were discussed. Background on
the racist laws and views underlying the post-slavery social and legal conditions of the nation was also provided. Additionally, common perceptions about placement of African-American principals were shared, along with the theoretical framework to be used in this study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Introduction

Research methodology is often referred to as a system of broad principles or rules from which specific methods or procedures may be derived to interpret or solve different problems within the scope of a certain discipline (Creswell, 2014). Depending on the nature and purpose of the investigation, I must ensure that the proper methods are employed during the implementation of the study (Stenbacka, 2001). A qualitative approach was used for this study. Chapter 3 details the research design method, the rationale for qualitative methodology and the conceptual framework, the participant and site selection criteria, and how the study was conducted.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is an approach used for exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of qualitative research involves identifying questions and procedures, collecting data (typically in the participant’s setting), performing data analysis and building from particulars to general themes, and interpreting the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014).

This study examined the perspectives of African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools regarding their future career advancement. In addition, the current research seeks to identify the internal and external pressures that accountability models such as North Carolina School Performance Grade initiatives create by placing more emphasis on student proficiency as opposed to student growth—which disproportionately punishes schools with higher percentages of poverty and minority students. Based on most recent national data, and despite the nation becoming more diverse overall, there continues to be a lack of racial diversity in the principalship. The current study looked at the
phenomenon by investigating several factors that have contributed to this absence of diversity over time.

**Characteristics of a Phenomenological Strategy**

Phenomenological research is a design of inquiry originating from philosophy and psychology in which I gains insight into the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by study participants (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenological research has its roots in the early twentieth century with philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul (Smith, 2013). During its early inception, these and other philosophers believed that understanding the experiences of others was critical for learning more about the world around us; they felt that only through studying and understanding every feeling, desire, and behavior of a moment can one begin to truly appreciate the value of such experiences. This undergirds their belief in the importance of understanding the perspective of how a phenomenon appears to or is perceived by an individual subject.

One of the most influential and earliest architects of the phenomenology strategy was Edmond Husserl (1900). He is often referred to as the principal founder of phenomenology, and additionally made several other major contributions to the field of philosophy, psychology, and mathematics. As a philosopher with a mathematical background, Husserl was interested in developing a general theory of inferential systems, which (following Bolzano) he conceived of as a theory of science based on the idea that every science (including mathematics) can be looked upon as a system of propositions interconnected by a set of inferential relations. Following John S. Mill, Husserl (1900) argues that the best way to study the nature of such propositional systems is to start with their linguistic manifestations, i.e., (sets of) sentences and (assertive) utterances thereof. Since phenomenological description yields ideal species, it involves what Husserl
describes as “eidetic reduction”, which is the goal of I to identify the basic components of the phenomena (Husserl, 1900).

A researcher conducting a phenomenological study is primarily concerned with the life experiences of the research subjects (Frankl, 1997). Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at illuminating the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and thus findings may challenge structural or normative assumptions. The purpose of phenomenological research is to gain a view into participants’ life-worlds, as well as to understand the personal meanings they have constructed from their lived experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2000).

The current study employed a phenomenological strategy to examine the perspectives and lived experiences of African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools regarding the impact of race on their recruitment, placement, and retention. These principals’ perspectives regarding the North Carolina School Performance Grades system were also investigated.

**Research Questions**

In working to understand the experiences of African-American principals, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors have led to the underrepresentation of African Americans in school leadership?

2. How do African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the internal and external factors influencing their decision to apply for or their placement at certain schools?
3. How do African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the impact of their placement on future career advancement?

4. How do African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the pressures that result from the current proficiency and growth formula of the North Carolina School Performance Grade Accountability Model?

Data sources and an analytical approach for the examination of these data were decided upon in advance of the implementation of the study. Table 3.1 outlines each research question along with its related data source and the analytical process used to draw conclusions about the question.

**Table 3.1: Research Questions and Methodology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What factors have led to the underrepresentation of African Americans in school leadership?</td>
<td>Pertinent research and literature</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do African-American male principals of rural elementary high-minority, high-poverty schools describe the impact internal and external factors influence their decision to apply for or their placement at certain schools?</td>
<td>Principal interview</td>
<td>Transcribing Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do African-American male principals of rural elementary high-minority, high-poverty schools describe the impact their placement will have on future career advancement?</td>
<td>Principal interview</td>
<td>Transcribing Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How do African-American male principals of rural elementary high-minority, high-poverty schools describe the pressures that result from the current proficiency and growth formula of North Carolina’s School Performance Grade accountability model?</td>
<td>Principal interview</td>
<td>Transcribing Coding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appropriateness of the Conceptual Framework

The research questions and experiences of African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools were analyzed in this study using the conceptual framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT). The CRT framework can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways that race and racism both implicitly and explicitly affect social structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, 2005). The fundamental principle of CRT is to examine and highlight the internal and external influences that have shaped the experiences of individuals of color; CRT challenges the notion of White privilege, and its theoretical underpinnings are embedded in the lived experiences of people of color. Scholars of CRT argue that racism greatly influences multiple aspects of human and American culture, as it is a part of the history and fabric of the nation (Tate, 1997). Arguably, until Americans can acknowledge the overwhelming and pervasive influence of race and racism, meaningful, sustainable change will not occur. Adding to the body of research on the topic, this qualitative study examined the impact of race in the recruitment, placement, and retention of African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools in North Carolina.

Participants and Site Selection

A growing number of studies have examined the experiences of African-American male principals, but an overwhelming majority of these focus more on middle schools and high schools in urban settings. This study addressed the gap in the literature by exploring the perspectives of African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority North Carolina elementary schools.

The school districts selected in this study were chosen to ensure an adequate sample size, and because each district has a strong blend of diverse schools within it. A combination of
archival and school demographic data were used to identify a pool of candidates who met the selection criteria. Individuals in this initial pool were sent a request for participation (Appendix A) to determine their level of interest in being included in the study. The eight participants who emerged from this process to participate in the study were African-American male principals from various rural North Carolina school districts who were currently serving in schools that are both high-poverty (50% or more free/reduced-price lunch) and high-minority (50% or more African American and/or Hispanic). These individuals were provided with information to inform his decision about participating in the study, and each participant signed the informed consent document (Appendix B). I interviewed each participant using the research protocol provided in Appendix C. Table 3.2 below includes the demographics of the study participants.

**Table 3.2: Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Omar</th>
<th>Tony</th>
<th>Barry</th>
<th>Christopher</th>
<th>Thomas</th>
<th>Michael</th>
<th>Robert</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>46-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as a principal</td>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>4-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as principal at current school</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-time principal in a high-poverty, high-minority elementary school?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools in which principal has served as principal</td>
<td>1 ES 1 MS</td>
<td>1 ES</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1 HS</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1 ES</td>
<td>2 ES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar with the current formula structure of the NC School Performance Grade (SPG) Accountability Model?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Omar</th>
<th>Tony</th>
<th>Barry</th>
<th>Christopher</th>
<th>Thomas</th>
<th>Michael</th>
<th>Robert</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of student population that is African American/Hispanic</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of student population identified as economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*ES = Elementary School, MS = Middle School, HS = High School

Instrumentation

To gather data from the participants related to the research questions, I constructed the interview protocol included in Appendix C. The questions included in the interview protocol provided me with great insight into various aspects of each participant’s professional and personal experience as a principal. The first set of questions (Items 1-4) were designed to provide insight into the professional journey of the participants, while the next set (Items 5-8) focused on Research Question 2. These questions were designed for me to gather insight into the perceived factors these principals believed were considered when they were placed at their respective schools, or, if applicable instead, the factors they considered at the time they applied for the position. I found it very interesting to hear these principals talk about their perceptions of the job of their colleagues who serve in schools that have SPGs of A or B (Item 8). The next few questions (Items 9-11) were designed to address Research Question 3 and provide insight into how participants perceived the impact of their current placement on their future as a principal. The last two questions (Items 12 and 13) were developed to offer insight into these principals’ perceptions of the NC SPG Accountability Model.
Prior to using the interview protocol in this study, I acquired the assistance of four colleagues and four fellow graduate students to review the questions. This process not only assisted in addressing any issues with the clarity of the interview questions, but it also allowed me to strengthen the validity of the instrument. Based on feedback from these individuals, two interview questions were refined to ensure clarity.

**Data Collection**

For each of the schools included in this study, demographic data were collected to identify the school’s percentage of African-American students and the percentage of students who receive free/reduced-price lunch. Data were also collected to identify the race of the principals of these elementary schools and ensure that the participant was African American. I also conducted interviews to gather critical data regarding principals’ perceptions of how race has impacted their recruitment, placement, and retention, as well as the way in which being placed in certain schools has affected their career trajectories. Data collected from these interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emerging themes related to the research questions.

**Data Analysis**

Interview questions were developed to explore the perceptions of the selected participants, grouped within the following categories: discovery of vacancy; application, interview, hiring, and placement process; career advancement opportunities; and internal and external pressures. The same grouping was used in coding and data analysis to maintain consistency. During the analysis of interview transcriptions, thematic coding was employed to identify emerging themes from the participants. A code table was created to illustrate the code,
code definition, and the number of instances each particular code emerged during the analysis of interview transcriptions.

**Research Reliability and Validity**

While a quantitative study has a “purpose of explaining,” the purpose of a qualitative study is “generating understanding” (Stenbacka, 2001, p. 551). A good qualitative study can help one “understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing” (Eisner, 1991, p. 58). To ensure a qualitative study is reliable, I must make certain that protocols and structures are in place before, during, and after designing and executing it. Thus, the term “dependability” is often used in qualitative research to refer to reliability.

The concept of validity is described by a wide range of terms in qualitative studies. It is not a single, fixed, or universal concept, but “rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects (Golafshani, 2003). Validity is critical in ensuring a kind of qualifying check or measure for research, because if the validity or trustworthiness can be maximized or tested, then the results may be more “credible and defensible” (Johnson, 1997, p. 283). This, in turn, may lead to generalizability, one of the concepts suggested by Stenbacka (2001) as the structure for both doing and documenting high-quality research. Therefore, the quality of a research study is related to generalizability of the results, and the validity or trustworthiness of the methods. Validity and reliability of the research in this study was achieved through the following actions:

- A methodology table was used to ensure that research questions are properly aligned to qualitative research methods and the theoretical framework.
- Prior to conducting the interviews, a table including the interview questions and this study’s research question was created and shared with participants.
• The Pre-interview Questionnaire was designed and delivered through Qualtrics to gather background data on the principals to confirm that they met the criteria for participation.

• Member checking was performed by providing participants with a transcript of their interview to ensure accuracy.

• Multiple interviews were conducted with purposefully selected subjects.

• The researcher’s experience, competence, and background (deep familiarity) with the phenomenon being investigated.

**Researcher’s Role**

My role in this study was that of an interviewer and interpreter. I had no experience in the hiring practices of principals, nor had I served on any district-level committees or interview panels. I currently serve as a principal of a rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary school. Moreover, I have spent the entirety of my 10-year professional career as either a classroom teacher or administrator serving in rural, high-poverty, high-minority schools with high needs. Thus, I recognize that personal biases and experiences could potentially influence the study.

During my career, I have found immense pleasure working with some of the most vulnerable students in the school and the district community. As an elementary mathematics teacher for fifth grade, I consistently achieved annual state assessment scores above the district and state averages. During a span of four years, end-of-grade assessment scores increased significantly from 26.1% to 96.4%. However, in working currently as a building-level administrator, I have had difficulty achieving this same level of success. During my three-year tenure as principal, student proficiency scores have stagnated at around 28%, teacher turnover has been high, and the school has received a School Performance Grade of “F.” Even more, a
growing number of students have been identified with special learning needs, and systematic and generational poverty at the school has had crippling effects on many critical aspects of teaching and learning. It has been identified as one of the low-performing schools in the district under the state’s current accountability model. Although the school has met or exceeded expected growth in three of the last four years, I recognize the importance in establishing schoolwide systems and structures that promote high student achievement.

Because I am a novice principal interested in learning about vacant positions and new opportunities that become available, I have become increasingly concerned with the current hiring and placement trends of my fellow colleagues. It appears that, far too often, race is the determining factor in the selection and placement of principals within several rural North Carolina districts. Thus, one inspirational factor driving this study is my desire to learn to what extent fellow African-American male principals experience similar racially-centered challenges and obstacles, and to understand how they view the NC SPG initiative. By performing a broad review of pertinent literature and research, conducting study participant member checking to increase accuracy, and working under the expertise and oversight from my dissertation committee, I maintained an ethical and professional perspective throughout the process of this study.

Research Plan

This study’s research design consisted of several steps for the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the gathered data. District- and school-level data were collected to identify African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority schools across selected North Carolina school districts. Districts were specifically chosen to ensure an adequate sample size, and because they possessed a good blend of both high-poverty, high-minority schools and
low-poverty, low-minority schools. Once these participants were identified, they were sent an official request for participation. Participants who agreed to take part in the study then received a cover letter and Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Appendix A) designed to gather critical background information on each participant.

I conducted confidential interviews with African-American male principals to gather critical data regarding their perceptions of the impact of race on their recruitment, placement, and retention, as well as how they feel their placement in such schools has affected their career trajectories. Data collected from the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Atlast.ti coding software.

Annual data released by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction were also collected to identify the state-assigned School Performance Grades and aid in the selection of elementary schools. These grades are the result of North Carolina’s 2011 Excellent Public Schools Act legislation, which uses an A-F letter system to grade all the state’s public schools. These SPGs reflect student performance on annual specific assessments, college and workplace readiness measures, and graduation rates. Under the current formula, 80% of a school’s performance grade is based on school achievement, while only 20% is based on school growth. Supporters of school performance grades argue that this type of accountability system ensures greater transparency and makes it easier to convey the state of learning institutes to the public. Critics of the system argue that the use of letter grades oversimplifies the measurement of student success or underperformance, increases pressure to pay attention to tests, ignores school quality factors other than test scores, and demoralizes both teachers and parents.
**Anticipated Ethical Issues**

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, I took several steps to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines were followed. A Qualtrics Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Appendix A) was sent to participants to gather information including a location in which participants would feel most comfortable to conduct confidential interviews. Participants were provided with a copy of the Interview Consent Form (see Appendix B) to review and sign prior to conducting the interviews. It provided assurances that I would ensure their confidentiality, collect data in a responsible manner, maintain the data and recording device in a responsible and ethical manner, and disclose potential risks for participating in this study. These commitments were adhered to throughout the implementation of this study. I discouraged the use of public venues to better protect the identity of participants and ensure the quality of the data collection process was not compromised. Pseudonyms were assigned to each research participant to protect their identity, and these were used throughout the study for anonymity. After the interview process, participants were provided with copies of interview transcripts to review for accuracy.

Throughout the implementation of the study, I maintained the security of personally identifiable information about the participants and sensitive data from the interviews. Immediately after participant interviews, the digital recording device was transported back to my home so that it could be placed in a locked file cabinet to which I had the only key. Interview transcriptions were stored in an electronic file on a secure, password-protected computer. All data related to this study will be destroyed upon successfully receiving final approval of the dissertation from the university. Similar care was taken with information that would identify the districts in which these principals work. I have also worked to maintain participant
confidentiality in the discussion of results included in Chapters 4 and 5. Care was taken to ensure that participants were not identified by their real names. Additional care was taken to ensure that no contextual information provided herein would allow readers to deduce the identity of a participant.

**Limitations of the Study**

As with any research, there were limitations of which I remained aware throughout the process of conducting the study:

1. This study was limited to a sample of African-American males who serve as elementary school principals in the state of North Carolina.
2. The number of participants was relatively small to provide an opportunity for greater depth of analysis. However, this limited the generalizability of the findings to contexts other than those in which the study occurred.
3. The study was limited to principals in schools with specific profiles:
   a. The participating principals currently serve at elementary schools or previously served as an elementary principal during the initial rollout of the NC SPG Accountability Model in the 2013-2014 school year.
   b. These principals led schools in which 50% or more students receive free/reduced-price lunch, and in which 50% or more of the student population is African American and/or Hispanic.
4. My own professional role as an African-American male principal of a rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary school may have made it difficult for me to entirely bracket or suspend my personal beliefs during the data analysis process. I have witnessed firsthand the profound impact of systemic and generational poverty
on school readiness for early learners, student achievement, and the psychological state of students who live in high-crime communities. I have also experienced what I perceive as the negative impact of the current structure of the NC SPG Accountability Model on schools that have higher percentages of students of color and those who receive free/reduced-price lunch. While the ability to set aside one’s own personal beliefs and assumptions may be difficult, it is a crucial step in the analysis process (Moustakas, 1994), and I strived to be aware of and account for my bias in analyzing the study data. Although individuals are shaped by their experiences, value systems, and world view, it was important not to allow these influences to impact the objective reporting and analysis of the data. The goal of bracketing is to have a fresh perspective regarding the phenomenon (Bridges, 2010).

5. This study was limited by the dwindling number of African-American male principals at the elementary school level. Originally, the study was intended to highlight and focus on four specific rural districts in North Carolina; combined, however, these districts had a total of one African-American male principal at the elementary level. Upon further review and analysis of principal placement data in several surrounding rural districts, it became evident that the small number of male principals at the elementary school level applied to African-American and White male principals. As a result, I had to open the scope of the study to include additional rural school districts.

6. I was not able to obtain statewide principal placement data. These data would have allowed me to determine the extent to which African-American males are disproportionately placed in high-poverty, high-minority schools across the state of North Carolina.
Table 3.3 below represents data collected from various North Carolina rural school districts. As evident in the table, there is a clear underrepresentation of African-American males at the elementary school level. There also appears to be a tendency for school districts to place females to serve as principals of elementary schools.

Table 3.3: Number of Principals of Rural, High-Poverty, High-Minority Elementary Schools by District and Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Elementary Schools</th>
<th>Black Male Principals</th>
<th>Black Female Principals</th>
<th>White Male Principals</th>
<th>White Female Principals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One principal’s race could not be identified; thus, this district may have had another Black male principal.

Assumptions

The interactions with participants included their responses on matters that might be deemed sensitive. I therefore assumed that participants responded honestly to survey items and qualitative interview prompts. Furthermore, I assumed that participants responded without fear of negative consequences for their views and perspectives regarding the perceived effects of race on their recruitment, placement, and retention.
Chapter Summary

Several factors have contributed to the underrepresentation of African-American males in the principalship. Though this is a growing concern for several states around the country, the problem becomes even more complex for states like North Carolina due to its increasingly diverse population and high percentage of rural locations. While North Carolina has the second largest rural population in the nation, the unique needs of rural school districts are often ignored among education discussions. Over two-thirds of North Carolina’s traditional public-school districts are rural, and nearly 40% of students in traditional public schools are educated in rural districts. Due to the number of children who attend rural schools and the state’s growing diversity, it is important that these institutions are led by more diverse coalition of principals.

This chapter detailed the appropriateness of using phenomenological research methods to capture rich data on the lived experiences of African-American male principals who lead rural, high-poverty, high-minority schools. The research design method that was employed for this study, the rationale for qualitative methodology, and the conceptual framework were also discussed. African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools within select North Carolina districts were interviewed to gather critical data on their perspective regarding future career advancement opportunities and the impact of the state’s School Performance Grade Accountability Model on their schools and students. The information gathered from these interviews was transcribed, analyzed, and coded to identify emerging themes.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Chapter Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of African-American male principals who serve in rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools and the perceived role that race plays in their recruitment, placement, and retention. Although the influence and impact of race served as the primary lens through which the issue of the underrepresentation of African Americans in school leadership was explored, I believed additional layers were equally important to explore in order to adequately examine the issue. One such layer examined by this study was the effect of accountability models such as the North Carolina School Performance Grade (NC SPG) Accountability Model on students and leaders of color. Specifically, this study examined the impact of the NC SPG Accountability Model on the daily work and future career aspirations of African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools.

Over the course of several months, I conducted participant interviews. Due to the limited number of African-American male elementary principals in several of the rural counties across the state of North Carolina, I was only able to secure eight participants, rather than the 10 participants originally projected for this study. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The interviews were conducted using the Interview Protocol developed for the study (Appendix C). The interviews ranged from 11 to 48 minutes in length; all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to ensure there was a complete, accurate record of discussions with each participant. The brevity of the 11-minute interviews warrants further explanation. Although all the participants provided valuable insights into the topic of this study, one principal was very hesitant to elaborate on his responses to the interview questions; this resulted in his interview
being significantly shorter than the other seven. Once participant interviews were completed, copies of the interview transcripts were provided to all participants via hand delivery or through a secure document-sharing platform. Participants were allotted seven days to review the interview transcripts and inform me of any discrepancies or errors. However, none of the participants identified any major errors in their interview transcription. Once transcriptions were reviewed and approved by each participant, they were uploaded to the Atlas.ti coding software.

Data collected from participant interviews provided great insight into how the lack of diversity in educational leadership, discriminatory hiring practices, and poorly crafted accountability models have negatively impacted principals who lead certain types of schools. Likewise, the data collected from this study also highlighted the psychological damage the NC SPG Accountability Model has imposed on these leaders and potentially other leaders of color across the state of North Carolina. These psychological effects not only negatively impact the principals who lead these schools, but they also adversely affect the students, staff, and the communities in which the schools are located. Just as importantly, these types of accountability models often negatively impact the overall culture of the school environment. It was striking to hear to the degree to which many of the leaders who participated in this study expressed clear frustration with the NC SPG Accountability Model and questioned their abilities to lead these types of schools.

As a fellow principal who serves in a high-poverty, high-minority, rural elementary school, I was eager to hear the views of colleagues from across the state about the topic. Not only did my time with the participants allow me to gather valuable insights into the minds and experiences of these principals, but it also provided them with an opportunity to share many of the emotions and frustrations related to this issue that they have been experiencing. Besides
uncovering many covert and overt practices that district leaders in charge of hiring and placement often use to sell vacancies or placements to current or aspiring principals within their respective districts, the findings of this study also revealed many hidden beliefs held by these African-American male leaders with regard to where they see themselves in the future of public education. These practices and beliefs highlight some of the complexities and challenges that currently exist in the American education system. They furthermore highlight the challenging work that should be done to promote and achieve a level of diversity in the principalship across the state of North Carolina—one that mirrors the changing landscape of the American society.

Prior to conducting the study interviews, I asked participants to complete a 10-question Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Appendix A) that was designed to gather critical background information on each principal. This information provided me with valuable insight and context for understanding their years of experience as a principal, including any prior professional experience working in rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools, as well as their level of familiarity with the NC SPG initiative. The questionnaire also asked participants their preference regarding a location for conducting the confidential interview. Overwhelmingly, participants preferred to conduct their interview in their school offices, at a time of day when staff were not on campus. During my conversations with participants, some attributed this to their desire to not be interrupted during the interview. Many of them, however, admitted that they did not want a staff member to hear them discussing such a controversial, uncomfortable issue such as race. As one participant stated:

> Around here or in this community, whenever issues about race come up, it stirs up a lot of emotions and division. My staff is about 50% White and 50% Black, and we have learned
very fast not to discuss issues of race around here, which is sad because our community is becoming more and more diverse every year.

I recognized early in the design phase of the study that, if I had any chance of collecting meaningful and useful data, participant interviews would have to be conducted at a location where participants felt most comfortable and free to fully express their thoughts and opinions on the topic.

**Pre-Interview Questionnaire**

As indicated in the previous section, prior to conducting the study interviews, I administered a Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Appendix A) to each participant. One of the pieces of information I wanted to gather from the questionnaire was how these principals defined career advancement. As a fellow principal of a high-poverty, high-minority school, I was very interested to learn how other principals defined the term and the types of opportunities they viewed as advancement in their personal careers. I was eager to see if these principals would consider the opportunity to serve in a more diverse or affluent school as an advancement opportunity. Overwhelmingly, most of the participants defined career advancement as opportunities that allow them to serve in a secondary school such as middle school or high school or work beyond the school level, such as at the district or state level. These principals’ desire to have more influence in district educational decisions and be better compensated for their talents and ability to lead high-needs schools were the two biggest influences shaping their definition of career advancement. Table 4.1 below provides an overview of the participants’ responses regarding their views of career advancement.
Table 4.1: Participants’ Definitions of “Career Advancement”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Definition of “Career Advancement”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Opportunities given by the district or out of the district that is commensurate with my skillset at that time in my career. Based upon my body of work, opportunities afforded to me to advance my career that will provide a more diverse experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar</td>
<td>An opportunity to be promoted to a larger school or to a central office position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>My current placement is preparing me for future positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry</td>
<td>The opportunity to move to higher levels and making higher salaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>Any position that prepares you for another position at a larger school or with more responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>The opportunity to serve in a larger school like a middle school or high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>An opportunity to work in a larger capacity or more influential role; having more students and staff or serving in the Central Office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>The opportunity to lead a bigger elementary school or possibly a middle school or high school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Profiles

As was noted previously, participants’ identities were protected using pseudonyms. Profiles of the individuals who participated in this study follow.

David is an African-American male principal of 44 years of age. He is a well-known member of the community and serves on various local committees. David has served as a principal for six years and has been at his current elementary school for one year. In addition to his current position, he has previously served at two other high-minority, high-poverty schools, another elementary school and a middle school. The study interview took place in David’s office at the elementary school where he currently leads as principal. Even before the interview began, it was evident that David was very relaxed and eager to share his opinion on this topic. An outspoken and strong advocate for public education, David is very vocal on what he calls “the attack on public education” in North Carolina by current state officials. In his Pre-Interview Questionnaire response, David defined career advancement as “opportunities given by the
district or out of the district that are commensurate with my skillset at that time in my career,” and which given him opportunities to advance his career based on his body of work.

Omar is an African-American male principal who is 47 years old. He has served as a principal for eight years and has been at his current elementary school for two years. Omar has served in one other high-minority, high-poverty elementary school that is in another district. The interview was held in Omar’s school office, at the end of the instructional day. Like David, Omar was very eager to share his perspective on the topic of this study. In his Pre-Interview Questionnaire response, Omar defined career advancement as “an opportunity to be promoted to a larger school or to a central office position.” Prior to coming to the public-school system, in the initial stages of his professional career, Omar worked in a private school. After four years in the private sector, however, Omar felt that it was time for a change and sought out to experience what the public-school system had to offer.

Tony is a 36-year-old African-American male principal. He has served as a principal for four years, all of which have been at his current elementary school. Prior to his appointment at the school where he served as principal, Tony had no previous experience working in high-minority, high-poverty schools. We conducted the study interview in Tony’s office at the end of the school day. One of the youngest principals in his district, Tony is a very driven and motivated administrator. He is often touted by many of his fellow colleagues as someone whom they can easily see earning the position of a district leader or superintendent soon. Tony described career advancement as the ability of his current placement to prepare him for future positions.

Barry is an African-American male principal of 36 years of age. He has served as a principal for three years and has been at his current elementary school for one year. Barry has
previously served in one other high-minority, high-poverty school, which was also an elementary school. During his 14-year career as an educator, Barry has served in various roles prior to stepping into the principalship. Barry is widely known as an advocate for school choice, and he makes it a point to reiterate that he prefers fair school choice. As he believes Americans live in a free-market society, Barry thinks that parents should have the option to choose their children’s schools, especially in the most vulnerable communities. Barry also maintains that all charter, private, and public schools should be measured by the same standards and should utilize accountability models that highlight student achievement and student progress. Barry defined career advancement as the opportunity to move to higher levels and make higher salaries.

Christopher is a 53-year-old African-American male principal. He has served as a principal for seven years and has worked for two years at his current elementary school. Previously, Christopher served as principal of one other high-minority, high-poverty elementary school. Though known by many of his peers as a quiet individual, Christopher has become more vocal as he approaches the later stages of his professional career. Christopher defined career advancement as any position that prepares a principal for another position at a larger school or for a position with more responsibilities.

Thomas is an African-American male principal. He is 46 years old and has served as a principal for 10 years and has been at his current elementary school for two years. Thomas is a native of North Carolina who worked as the principal in a middle school in one of the nation’s largest urban systems for six years before recently moving back to the state. He is viewed by many as a strong instructional leader who is very capable of coaching novice and veteran teachers, and aspires to teach at the college or university level. Thomas defined career advancement as the opportunity to serve in a larger school like a middle school or high school.
Michael is an African-American male principal who is just 35 years old. He is serving in his first principalship, and is one of the youngest principals in his district. He has big goals for the next 10 years of his career, including plans to continue his education by pursuing a Doctoral degree within the next few years and eventually to get involved with community advocacy. Michael is a native of the community where his current school is located and is well known there. As the third principal in two years to assume leadership at his current school, Michael often says that his current school will “make or break you as an administrator.” Michael defined career advancement as an opportunity to work in a larger capacity or more influential role; having more students and staff or serving in the district’s central office.

Robert is an African-American male former principal who is 49 years of age. He has served as a principal for 10 years and was the principal for two years at the previous elementary school where he worked. During his total career in the principalship, Robert served as the principal of two high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools; one is located in the district of his last position and one is in another district. At the beginning of the current school year, Robert was informed by his superintendent that he will be recommending to the board that Robert be moved to one of the local elementary schools as an assistant principal. When asked about why he was being moved, the superintendent said that he was very concerned about the lack of progress that the school has made during Robert’s tenure there and felt that a change was needed. Robert defined career advancement as the opportunity to lead a bigger elementary school or possibly a middle school or high school.

Interviews were conducted with each of these individuals. The Study Interview Protocol (Appendix C) was followed to guide the interviews, and the study’s research questions were used as the foundation for the interview prompts.
Participant Interview Data and Emergent Themes

During the review and analysis of participant interview data, I identified emerging themes for each research question. At times, these themes were easily identified, though there were instances in which follow-up interviews were necessary to gain some clarity about a participant’s response. For this research, a threshold was not utilized to quantify a theme, which was partly due to the limited number of participants who qualified for the study. It was also because each one of these participants provided a unique perspective on this topic and added a richness to the quality of the study.

Research Question 1

The literature in Chapter 2 documents the underrepresentation of African Americans in the principalship. As stated in the data sources matrix, I answered Research Question 1 by reviewing major works along with historical and contemporary research that has laid out factors contributing to the lack of diversity in school leadership. Many studies have examined this dilemma through the lens of pre- and post- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) decision as well as through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). An examination of literature that documents the underrepresentation of African Americans and African-American males in the principalship was provided in Chapter 2. The following results, as gleaned from this study’s participants, provide insights into the factors that have produced the disproportionately low participation in this pivotal school leadership position.

When examined in an historical context that traces the origins of racism in this country, issues related to race are easily seen as complex and multifaceted. In a 2014 PBC docuseries called Race: The Power of an Illusion, the narrator draws connections between the concept of race and other characteristics of individuals, stating, “The idea of race assumes that simple
external differences rooted in biology are limited to other more complex internal differences like athletics, musical aptitude, and intelligence” (PBS, 2014). Not only has the construct of race served to be divisive in human society, it has also been especially impactful in American culture due to the advantages and disadvantages that often come with it. Race and racism have served as motivators in the marginalization, disenfranchisement, and dehumanization of citizens of color.

Sadly, the story of American history is filled with chapters of abuse and violence against citizens of color. From the early indigenous natives of this country who were conquered and slaughtered by Europeans to the Africans who were ripped from their homelands and placed into a system of bondage and slavery, racism has long been interwoven into the fabric of the American story. This complex history must be kept in mind when one considers the numerous factors that have led to the underrepresentation of African Americans in school leadership, as there are no simple answers or single variables that can be viewed as simple cause and effect. As outlined above, there are many factors that have contributed to the underrepresentation of African-American males in the principalship in North Carolina. I focused primarily on three areas to address Research Question 1, and these areas were selected because they all relate to race and systematic racism. I felt that this was appropriate since this study attempts to bring attention to many of the covert and overt practices that have been and continue to be used to oppress citizens of color.

**Fractured pipeline to the principalship for African Americans.** There is growing diversity in many communities within the state of North Carolina and around the country, yet there continues to be a persistent gap in the number of African-American teachers compared to White teachers working in American classrooms. Not only does this create a short-term dilemma in representation, but it also creates a long-term challenge for schools trying to recruit educators
of color. Due to the dwindling presence of African-American educators, there is a smaller pool of African-American candidates to fill leadership positions within the education arena. This trend has worsened, despite the mounting research that highlights the positive impact teachers of color can have on students of color as well as other students (Boisrond, 2017; Griffin & Tackie, 2017; Will, 2017). Finding and hiring an adequate number of African-American educators continues to be a struggle for many school districts.

It is also important to recognize the issue of the lack of the diversity in school leadership as a symptom of the infrastructure that has been established in America. In a quote that many credit to Edwards Deming (1986), “Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.” Therefore, to examine the scope of this issue, it is important to examine the underlying factors and how they are interconnected. For decades, a multitude of researchers have studied the achievement gap present between White students and students of color in communities and states around the country. Although the approach, research methods, and amount of time spent studying this phenomenon have varied, researchers have all settled on a similar conclusion—students of color continue to have persistent problems with academic success, despite the many strategies and efforts to improve their performance and opportunities. In fact, White students continue to outperform students of color in nearly every academic metric in this country (Lee, 2002). This persistent achievement gap between Black and White students leads to fewer African Americans entering and completing college, which results in a smaller pool of African-American teacher candidates and, ultimately, a smaller pool of aspiring African-American principals.

**Desegregation.** Unquestionably, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) decision has had a profound impact on the historical underrepresentation of African Americans in school leadership. Moreover, the ripple effects of this decision were felt across various sectors
of the Black community. Schools that served the students and adults of the Black community were closed, and many Black teachers were fired. Many African-American male principals were also fired or demoted, or they were subjected to harsh working conditions until they ultimately resigned. These principals, who once had an opportunity to lead Black schools, suddenly found themselves unemployed or under-employed in this new system. The belief that African-American males were incapable or undeserving of leading schools with a presence of White students appears to be a view still held by some hiring officials today. Sadly, North Carolina was one of the states that experienced one of the biggest declines in its number of Black principals (Tillman, 2004). It seems ironic that a court decision sold as a gesture of goodwill to “improve” the quality of education for millions of children of color across the country instead stripped away one of the most influential and important assets in educating Black youth—the Black principal.

**Racial discrimination.** As outlined in Chapter 2, it is evident that African-American citizens have experienced centuries of systematic racism and discrimination. They have had to contend with various laws, court decisions, and practices that were discriminatory and racially motivated, while also trying to counter the narrative of the many negative stereotypes perpetuated about them. These negative images and stereotypes were designed to not only present them as subhuman creatures who were not deserving of equal treatment under the law, but they were also designed to infiltrate the psyche of White America. Historically, African-American men have been the primary focus of these negative stories, portrayed as aggressive and angry individuals who must be controlled to maintain the system of White supremacy. In his book *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*, author Claude Steele (2010) outlines the impact of stereotypes and their power to influence human behavior. He makes the argument that stereotypes not only influence how we treat others, but they also affect
the behaviors of those being stereotyped. An example of this would be a person choosing not to wear a certain hairstyle, such as dreadlocks, for fear that they would be perceived as pro-Black and anti-White. Steele (2010) also talks about experiments conducted by him and his colleague Steven Spencer, which studied the body’s reaction to negative stereotypes and found that the threat of stereotypes caused some participants to experience an elevated heart rate and higher blood pressure. As a part of the foundation of this book, Steele (2010) provides a detailed and insightful account of the day he became aware of the issues he would encounter due to his Blackness. Although the context of his account centers on an incident he experienced as a young child when denied access to a public swimming pool, it does provide a great narrative of how one’s race can be an asset for some and a liability for others.

**Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 in the current study was: *How do African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the internal and external factors influencing their decision to apply for or their placement at certain schools?*

Participant interviews were conducted to answer Research Question 2. Based on responses of the participants who participated in this study, five of the eight were placed in their current principalship. The five principals who were placed were already employed in their respective districts in some capacity. The remaining three participants applied for their current principalship when a vacancy presented itself. The first four themes in the analysis of Research Question 2 focus on factors that participants believed influenced their placement at their respective schools. These factors include prior experience in a high-poverty, high-minority school, the perception of being viewed as strong disciplinarians, race and gender, and “fit.” The next three themes focus on factors that participants considered when applying for the
principalship at their current school. Pressure from peers, both positive and negative, a sense of paying dues, and a preference for a smaller school were factors participants considered in their application to work at the school.

Regardless of profession, undoubtedly, there are several factors that a person typically takes into consideration when mulling over the decision to accept or decline a prospective job opportunity. These can include things such as the potential impact on members of his/her family, financial matters, potential career advancement, and work environment. Along with these factors, I expected to find additional hidden factors these principals considered when they applied for their particular principalship, or factors that they perceived hiring officials took into consideration when placing them in their current schools. Based on the Pre-Interview Questionnaire and interview data, participants fell into one of two categories regarding their current school assignment: they had either been placed at their current school by district officials or were interviewed and hired specifically for their current school assignment. Of the eight participants in the study, six were already employed in their respective districts when they assumed the principalship and were placed at their current school by district officials.

Regarding factors these six principals believed influenced local officials’ decision to place them at their respective schools, three major themes emerged: prior experience in a high-poverty, high-minority school; managing student discipline; and race and gender.

Prior experience in a high-poverty, high-minority school. Six out of eight participants indicated during interviews that they believed their previous experience working in a high-poverty, high-minority school was a critical factor in local officials’ decision to place them at their current school. During analysis of the data, the term “fit” came up multiple times. As participants recounted conversations they had with their local officials about the decision to
place principals, several noted that local hiring officials would often use the term “fit” to justify their placement or hire. As a part of my follow-up with participants, I wanted to explore this term a little deeper to identify what these officials believed constituted the men as being a good “fit” for one school assignment versus another. It was very interesting to hear the various things participants believed went into the conclusion of them being a good fit for certain schools. Such factors included their race and the race of most of the students and staff, their reputation within the district, their leadership style, and whether the local community would embrace them. David stated:

To be honest Mr. Alston, I think my superintendent and officials take a look at that person's characteristics, took a look at my background, took a look at my ability to lead in a challenging environment, and because the body of my work has been in challenging environments and has been successful, I believe he took that into consideration when placing me here. He told me that he believed that I would be a great “fit” for this school.

Typically, previous work experience in a similar environment is viewed as an important benefit for a new professional position, yet it appeared to be a heavy burden for many of these principals, who described it as both a blessing and a curse. They described their previous work experience as a blessing because it enabled them to walk through the doors of a challenging school with some idea of the trials and barriers they would encounter—valuable expertise in leading an often difficult environment. On the other hand, participants noted that having experience could be a curse; if they are able to achieve a reasonable tenure at their current school and/or make considerable improvements in student achievement, they will be “rewarded” with placement at another low-performing school—a pattern which several of the participants who
had prior experience serving in these types of schools described as a potentially continuous cycle. Thomas commented on this cycle:

> While I do enjoy my time here, I feel as though I am between a rock and a hard place. I am very good friends with the previous principal, and I have had the opportunity to witness firsthand what happens when a principal at a school like this starts to make improvements. All I keep hearing is that significant school improvement takes on average three to five years, but if we do make gains, we will be expected to repeat this same process at another low-performing school—with the likelihood that we may not be as successful due to several factors beyond our control.

Thus, it became clear that, for these principals, success in a low-performing school could mean sacrificing career advancement for yet another position at a different high-poverty, high-minority, high-needs school.

**Managing student discipline.** Schools with higher percentages of students in poverty and students of color often encounter challenges and needs which reach far beyond the parameters of the school walls. These challenges typically come in the form of lower access to high-quality healthcare services, higher unemployment or underemployment in the school and/or surrounding communities, higher percentages of crime, and lower percentages of two-parent homes. Because of the stressors students in these communities encounter daily, they may have difficulty coping in a productive manner, and for this reason, many of these schools may experience more incidents of violence, higher percentages of teen pregnancies, and lower levels of parental involvement. Unfortunately, there are many individuals within and outside of the education realm who still hold on to the belief that these types of schools must have a leader who is going to come in and lay
down the law, so to speak. These leaders are expected to rule with an iron fist and will be perceived as weak if they do not. Reflecting the opposite view, Christopher stated:

I think that oftentimes, low-performance schools with a lot of discipline issues, people at central office think that a man is more suitable for dealing with that demographic, particularly a black, African-American man. When you come into a school like mine, which is 99% African American, if you don’t know the school, you may walk in with a mindset of controlling students rather than developing students.

Developing students, then, according to Christopher, was the right way to achieve success in these types of schools, rather than the tough approach.

As previously mentioned, the perception of African-American male principals has been greatly influenced by the many stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream media and other aspects of American history and culture. Subsequently, district officials in charge of hiring may unknowingly or subconsciously allow these ideas to affect how they see these leaders and, ultimately, influence where they place them.

**Race and gender.** One of the constructs this study explored was the perceived role that race plays in the recruitment, placement, and retention of African-American male principals. When asked whether they believed race played a role in their placement, six out of the eight participants responded affirmatively. These participants spoke very candidly about their frustrations regarding the overwhelming amount of influence race still plays in many of the decisions in their districts and communities. Such frustration was expressed by many of the study participants, including Omar:

I would say absolutely race played a role in my placement here. I don’t know if [school name] has ever had a White principal. I don’t believe so, unless it was prior to the previous
25 years or so…I think race and gender both played a role. I don't think that based on the
dynamics or demographics of the kids I have, that they're willing to put a female principal
in this position.

Thomas echoed similar sentiments in stating, “I do. I think race will always play a role in public
education because, too often, the race of the candidate mirrors the majority race of the student
population and the staff.” It is no secret that issues centered on race can be very uncomfortable to
talk about and have the potential to become divisive and cause conflict. It was interesting to note
the way participants’ body language and tone of voice shifted as they discussed the issue of race;
they made less eye contact and uncomfortably shifted their body several times as they spoke.

For two principals who were hired after applying for the schools where they worked, the
following themes emerged. To qualify as a theme in this study, both individuals had to respond
similarly.

**Peer pressure.** One of the themes that I did not anticipate would surface during this
study was the considerable influence that peer pressure—both positive and negative—played in
these principals’ decision on whether to apply for a specific high-needs school. It is worth noting
that it appeared that the pressure from peers/colleagues to apply or not to apply for certain
schools was driven by their lived experiences and perceptions of race. These experiences served
as either negative or positive motivators for the participants in this study. Positive forms of peer
pressure included things such as family or friends encouraging them to apply to such schools
with the belief that they were the right person for the job, with the skillsets to transform the
learning environment for students and staff. Interestingly, the negative pressure these principals
endured was from colleagues who discouraged them to apply elsewhere, at schools that were
more diverse or had a majority of White students. They recalled several times that their
colleagues intentionally or unintentionally discouraged them from applying for certain positions at non-high-needs schools. Many participants described occasions when they did not apply for a position because they felt it was more likely that the district would hire a White candidate. As Michael remarked:

The reality is…when certain schools come open in my district, my fellow principals and I can oftentimes predict what the next principal is going to look like. There are some schools in this district that have never had a Black principal. So, when these schools become open, many of the African-American principals in my district don’t even apply for the school since we know our chances of being selected are very slim. There are several communities in this district which I do not feel would fully embrace an African-American principal right now.

The idea that race is a deciding factor for assigning principals to schools was also addressed by Tony, who shared:

I believe that my next principalship will not be at a school in my district that is a high-needs school. Although the school that I am currently at is slightly more African American, I believe that I have shown my district that I am better suited for the type of school I am currently at and feel that the community would be more receptive to me.

Peer pressure, then, emerged as a theme in the factors affecting these principals’ choice of schools to lead, thereby impacting their career paths.

**Paying dues.** From the interviews, it became apparent that participants felt serving in high-needs schools was, in a sense, a rite of passage. Many talked about it as a form of paying dues; if they had any chance of career advancement, they had to not only show that they could lead these challenging schools, but also that they could be successful at making positive gains in
student achievement. Hence, the African-American male principals in this study believed that serving in a high-needs school was an inevitable part of their journey as an educator. It is also worth noting that many of these principals spent most of their careers in education working as teachers in high-poverty, high-minority schools. Despite these principals’ evident commitment and expressed desire to see these schools and communities improve, the current structure creates the conditions for African-American male principals to treat high-needs schools as merely training grounds until other opportunities present themselves. However, since these are some of the most fragile and vulnerable schools across the state, such constant change in leadership hinders high-needs schools’ potential for progress. Thomas expressed that leading high-needs schools was often a way for minority males like him to demonstrate their abilities:

Being an educator who happens to be a male, I am a minority in this field. The most significant role that minority males can have in education is to select schools that are tough in order to get an opportunity to go elsewhere. What I found out is that a lot of male educators are given opportunities in schools that are low-performing, schools with some behavior issues—poverty is usually an issue—in order to...show you have what it takes to serve those areas.

Thus, while many highly qualified principals may be assigned to high-needs schools, unfortunately, too often, they are not given ample time to make significant improvements before a new leader comes in to assume the principalship. Such a structure diminishes the effectiveness of initiatives like the NC SPG Accountability Model, as well as undermines the career aspirations and professional growth of many African-American male principals.

Preference for smaller school. Many of the principals alluded to the fact that the size of the school was a major factor in their decision to apply for the principalship at a high-needs school.
Such schools, then, serve as a kind of training grounds for these novice principals who ultimately want to lead larger schools. Tony addressed how a smaller school worked for him at the start:

Well it's a rather small school. I have about 220 kids. It's kind of like…to kind of get you prepared for the principalship, not start you out with such a big school, just to kind of prepare you for that. I think that has helped me to grow, because I didn't have to start out so big. I was able to start small and then, next year, hopefully, I'll get a larger school.

Similarly, Barry noted his preference for a school with a smaller population when he was beginning his career:

I knew mostly about all the different schools in this community, and it was one of two schools that were open, and I applied to both of them. But I did know that this school did have a low population of students. It wasn't a very big school, and I believe that it was a great starter school for me. And again, low population—a low number of students who attended the school—was a big factor, basically, in me applying to be the principal of this school.

The size of the school, then, was one factor that affected these principals’ decision to work in a high-needs school, viewing it as an opportunity to get acclimated to the role.

**Research Question 3**

The current study’s Research Question 3 was: *How do African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the impact of their placement on future career advancement?*

Participant interviews were conducted to answer Research Question 3. The interview questions associated with this research question were designed to gather insight into how these principals not only viewed their current principalship, but also how they believed it may help or
hinder them in their professional journeys. Increased marketability and having the opportunity to serve the community were expressed as positives, while being perceived as ineffective leaders or the prospect of being handed another high-needs school were expressed as negatives.

It was evident that, regardless of the current stage of their career, many of the participants felt weary of their future as principals under the current NC SPG Accountability Model, particularly with the direct impact it has on schools that are high-poverty and serve higher percentages of students of color. Despite these challenges, two themes emerged that participants identified as potential benefits of their current placement: increased marketability and the idea of paying it forward. There was also one theme that emerged as a primary negative impact on their future career advancement, which was being labeled as ineffective leaders due to lack of success in their highly challenging schools. These themes are discussed below.

It was evident that, regardless of the current stage of their career, many of the participants were concerned about their future as principals under the current NC SPG Accountability Model, particularly with its direct impact on schools that are high-poverty and serve higher percentages of students of color. Despite these challenges, two themes emerged that participants identified as potential benefits of their current placement: increased marketability and the idea of paying it forward by serving the community. There was also one theme that emerged as a primary negative impact on their future career advancement, which was being labeled as ineffective leaders due to lack of success in their highly challenging schools. These themes are discussed below.

**Increased marketability**. Because of the various challenges these leaders encounter daily in their current assignments, many of the participants in this study expressed strong optimism regarding their chances to serve in more diverse schools or receive career advancement
opportunities in the future. The biggest factor underlying their optimism was a belief that assignments like their current placement in a high-needs school could make them more marketable to future employers—if they can demonstrate that they not only survived the assignment but were able to make some improvements in student achievement as well. Barry addressed this notion directly:

If you do poorly, it hinders your ability in most cases to get another job, because people want people who can grow schools. School districts want principals who can grow schools. However, on the flip side of that, if you're able to grow that school to a B or an A, C, B, or A, or what have you, if you're able to grow that school, then your ability to get a job is going to be fairly easy. Because that's what they're looking for on a resume, your ability to take a school from low-performing to high-performing.

**Serving the community.** The school leaders in this study were clearly very passionate about their work as educators. Six out of eight participants shared that one of the strongest reasons they stay in the profession is a desire to give back to their respective communities. Interestingly, even the principals who did not grow up or live in their current school’s community had a strong passion for playing a role in the transformation of the local community. Thomas spoke about the dire needs of these communities:

It can be very frustrating at times when I step back and look at the various things that my students have to battle every day before and after they leave us. It really perplexes me when I hear people talk about how confused they are when the few who are successful leave and don’t come back. While I do wish they would come back and help be a part of the catalyst who can turn things around, the odds are so stacked against them when you really step back and think about all the stuff they have seen over the years.
Participants also talked about specific community transformation efforts such as connecting with key community stakeholders to address challenges such as crime, economic development, and affordable housing—factors which undoubtedly have some impact on the students and their ability to achieve high performance.

**Likelihood of being labeled as ineffective leaders.** One of the biggest concerns that many of these participants expressed about their current placement is the likelihood that the current structure of the NC SPG Accountability Model will ultimately cause them to be perceived and labeled as ineffective leaders. As previously stated, the model’s current structure bases 80% of a school’s performance grade on student proficiency and 20% on student growth. Historically, schools identified as high-poverty and high-minority tend to have greater challenges meeting accountability standards and sustaining high student proficiency. As a result, these schools are disproportionately assigned School Performance Grades of “D” or “F” (Khrais, 2015). Participants made evident their concern about how their fellow colleagues, district leaders, and community would perceive them as leaders based on their time at the high-needs school. Many shared that they worried that the state-assigned School Performance Grade would follow them for the duration of their time as principals, damaging their reputation and future career advancement opportunities. As Robert stated:

I am so worried that when I leave here, it is going to be very difficult for me to find another principalship. There’s a good chance that future employers will look at this “F” School Performance Grade and automatically view me as terrible principal.
Research Question 4

Guiding the current study, Research Question 4 stated: *How do African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the pressures that result from the current proficiency and growth formula of North Carolina’s School Performance Grade accountability model?*

Participant interview data were collected to answer Research Question 4. These questions were designed to gather insight from participants regarding how the current structure of the NC SPG Accountability Model has impacted their work as African-American male principals leading high-poverty, high-minority schools. Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study struggled to identify any positives of this current accountability model and pointed to multiple ways in which it had negatively impacted their work as principals. These include increased challenges with teacher recruitment and retention, incomplete or inaccurate portrayals of their schools, feelings of self-doubt, and internal struggles for these principals over whether to stay at or leave their schools.

Many in the state’s education arena have identified the adoption and current structure of the NC SPG Accountability Model as one of the most pressing issues to be addressed if North Carolina has any chance of being viewed as one of the nation’s leaders in education as it has been for various other achievements (Hui, 2017, 2018a). North Carolina has slipped in its national rankings this year (Hui, 2018b), and in recent years more than two-thirds of the state’s schools have received School Performance Grades of “C” or lower (Khrais, 2015). However, as Lynn Shoemaker of the advocacy group Public Schools First NC remarked, “The only thing these grades tell us is where the poor kids go to school and where the rich go” (Khrais, 2015).
Simply put, the correlation between school performance and high levels of need is consistent and glaring.

**Internal struggle to stay or leave.** Participants indicated that the current structure of the NC SPG Accountability Model has created an internal struggle for them as a principal of a high-poverty, high-minority school. While these principals do take much pride in having the opportunity to serve students who look like them, they also acknowledged feeling some working in these types of schools. Based on the current formula that North Carolina uses to calculate School Performance Grades, there is much more emphasis placed on student achievement than on student growth. As a result, a disproportionate number of high-poverty, high-minority schools have been designated with an “F” or “D,” and/or as low-performing. The participants expressed that, as a result, serving in these types of schools can be dissatisfying at times. David commented on how personal career advancement concerns can affect these principals’ views:

I think it also creates for, especially African-American males, additional stress and pressure. We know that we're under the microscope because our schools may struggle when it comes to proficiency. It puts us in a position sometimes where we will leave the profession or leave the community seeking other opportunities, because we don’t want our careers hindered by that model. And so sometimes I think it forces our hand to start looking elsewhere to see what we can do to keep our families taken care of, to make sure that we're moving our careers forward and don’t allow these accountability models to ruin us. I think this model puts us in a position where we're constantly in flux and constantly have no stability, whether in the community or whether in the school.
Thus, the current structure of the NC SPG Accountability Model creates conditions for these principals that can sometimes force them to seek other opportunities, resulting in turnover which has its own impact on the education system.

**Increased challenges with teacher recruitment and retention.** One of the most harmful effects the NC SPG Accountability Model has had on high-poverty, high-minority schools has been on teacher recruitment and retention. For a principal in a rural school, staffing is an additional challenge they face and assigning a grade of “D” or “F” to the school may make this even more challenging. Many of the principals in this study expressed extreme frustration with the current structure of the NC SPG Accountability Model and the additional pressure it places on them. Their frustration most often stemmed from short-term and long-term challenges these principals foresee when it comes to ensuring that their students are afforded the opportunity to have highly effective teachers. David maintained that the issue of teacher turnover affected the ability of principals in high-needs schools to succeed:

> It is very difficult to build a staff to stay in a challenging environment where you are up against an 80/20 model, because not only does the 80/20 rule impact the administrator, it impacts the teachers. And so we’re looking at measuring the teacher and their value without taking into consideration all of the external factors that come into play. Too often the staff leaves. There’s constantly a revolving door at schools like mine.

Not only did these participants talk about the struggles that they have when it comes to hiring, but some of them also used the interview as an opportunity to share their perspectives on the ease their colleagues in other types of schools appear to have when it comes to hiring. Of the five participants who commented on their fellow colleagues, two were more vocal. Christopher pointed out how a school’s grade can deter strong teacher candidates:
Principals in schools with grades of “A” or “B” are going to be able to obtain some of the best staff or hire the staff. But, more importantly, they're going to be able to retain effective teachers. It is very frustrating for me when, on the rare occasion, I am able to hire a highly effective teacher or coach an average teacher into one, to only lose them to another school that recruits them with the idea that working with their students will not be nearly as challenging working with their current students.

Tony commented on the issue of teacher turnover, as well as other challenges schools like his face:

It’s really hard for me to sympathize with principals of “A” and “B” schools because they don't have to deal with behavior issues, the high teacher turnover, and low parental environment. My district leaders are quick to point out research that talks about the principal being the biggest factor that teachers choose to stay or leave a school, but they choose to ignore the harsh reality of the challenges schools like mine face every year. During my time here, I have spent a majority of my summers trying to hire staff or having to start the school year with long-term subs.

As highlighted by these comments, hiring and retaining good teachers and principals was stressed in this study as another problem faced by high-poverty, high-minority schools.

**Incomplete or inaccurate representation of school.** As a result of the disproportionate weight the current formula of the NC SPG Accountability Model places on student achievement compared to student growth, several participants claimed School Performance Grades do not reflect or provide a complete picture of the schools. This is because they overlook the challenges and progress that schools which tend to have higher percentages of students in poverty and students of color tend to make over the course of time. David said:
I think the current model sometimes forces us out of the business of education versus encouraging us to stay. Again, it has put me at great challenges, because my body of work is judged against an 80/20 model, where the majority of my success has come from the growth side than the 20% side. In the majority of the schools I've led, we have been able to grow students, even if we haven't hit high proficiency marks. So, I think this accountability model unfairly measures and judges the quality of the school. Although the verbiage says in there that schools still can be good schools even if they have not shown high proficiency.

As David noted, not placing an equivalent amount of weight on student growth and student achievement can mean good schools that have a lot of growth still score poorly based on the NC SPG Accountability Model.

**Self-doubt.** Probably one of the most negative aspects of the NC SPG Accountability Model is the psychological impact it has had on principals of high-poverty, high-minority schools. During my time with the principals who participated in this study, it was evident that the School Performance Grades assigned to their schools had affected their psyche. Several of these leaders questioned or were beginning to question whether they would remain in their current principal assignment, or even in education at all, in the next few years. The principals in this study doubted their own abilities and skillsets as school leaders. Many of them expressed, directly or indirectly, the heightened sense of uncertainty they felt regarding their job security. Omar expressed self-doubt in his interview:

Not only has [the NC SPG] accountability model really discouraged me to stay in education, it has really made me question my ability to lead this type of school. You
constantly hear from district people about the importance of getting our scores up and coming out of low-performance status...it seems as though that’s all that matters.

**Connection to Critical Race Theory**

As previously stated, this study applied Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework through which the issue of the underrepresentation of African Americans in school leadership was examined. Two primary tenets of CRT were utilized for this study, the Permanence of Racism and Interest Convergence.

At its fundamental core, CRT was designed to not only bring attention to the hidden hierarchical structures that have been established in American society, but it also sought to challenge the notion that the supposed “progress” being made in the country regarding race and racism was not an accurate picture of what was really going on in the Black community. To effectively break down these barriers and shine light on these hidden practices, CRT begins challenging race by identifying the roots and ideology of racism, and how it is normally disguised in society. Historically, those perceived to hold or operate in a position of power mask and camouflage their motives to maintain the system of White dominance and supremacy. Data and related theme analyses in this study highlight the various overt and covert practices hiring officials use when making decisions to hire or place African-American males to lead certain schools. These practices appear to be too often connected to race and/or stereotypical perceptions of African-American males. Additionally, the current study also underscores the psychological impact that practices and accountability models such as the NC SPG can have on these leaders and the communities they serve.

As evidenced by state and national data, African Americans are significantly underrepresented in the teacher workforce and various key educational leadership positions
(Boser, 2014; Sanchez et al., 2009). While researching for the current study, I concluded that the number of African-American males who serve in elementary schools in various districts around the state of North Carolina is remarkably low. Like middle and high school administrators, these elementary principals are often assigned to lead schools with higher percentages of students of color; such schools are also typically underfunded and under-resourced, and experience higher rates of teacher turnover (Walker, 2003). It may be common for principals of these schools to feel as though they have been placed in a no-win situation without an adequate network of support to guide them. Victims of racism find voice within CRT, discovering that they are not alone, as they are part of a community of resistance to the interwoven layers of racialized oppression.

Much like practices used during the desegregation era when Black principals were either demoted or subjected to such adverse conditions that they ultimately resigned or quit, many of today’s Black principals stand at a similar crossroads. Based on the current structure of the NC SPG, schools with higher percentages of students of color and students identified as low socioeconomic status overwhelmingly receive state-assigned SPGs of “D” or “F.” Participants in this study who chose to stay at their current schools spoke a lot about how the growing demands of their jobs and the various issues they confront daily are often associated with systematic, generational poverty. They also commented about the emotional and physical toll of their current assignment. Due to these issues, those who choose to leave may do so with a sense of regret or remorse since they truly understand the influence they have on students. When good principals decide to leave, it results in a profound loss of human capital not only for the school community, but for the students as well.
To compound this problem, a number of lawmakers in North Carolina are leading a movement to privatize the public system by introducing initiatives designed to take control of these schools. One such initiative is the Innovative School District (ISD). The ISD initiative requires that select schools identified by the State of North Carolina as low-performing are handed over to private Charter Management Organizations (CMO) to oversee the curriculum and instruction under the premise that CMOs are better equipped to increase student achievement. Not surprisingly, these private CMOs or Education Management Organizations are typically led by individuals who do not mirror the demographics of the school community (Public Schools First, 2016). Therefore, one could surmise that initiatives such as the NC SPG and ISD are motivated by a desire to maintain the system of White supremacy and serve the interests of those in power.

On the surface it may appear that the impact that the NC SPG has had on high-poverty, high-minority schools is simply an unintended consequence of poor legislation; however; when examined through a critical lens it would appear that this was indeed part of its intentions. It is worth noting that the key sponsors of the legislation that first introduced the NC SPG model as a part of the North Carolina Excellent Public Schools Act, were politically connected and endorsed by the American Legislative Exchange Council. Two of the biggest donors to ALEC, brothers Charles and David Koch, are known for pushing their agenda for the privatization of the American education system and the deregulation of the corporate system (Graves, 2011). As a candidate for Vice President in 1980, David Koch helped inject the idea of privatizing public schools into the national debate. The Koch brothers’ immense wealth has allowed them to funnel millions of dollars to various organizations and entities that will help push their political, economic, and education agendas (Bridges Project, 2014)
During my time with participants, it was evident that many of them have yearned for an opportunity to share their experiences and views with others. Several participants told me, at the end of their interview, how therapeutic it was for them to express their emotions and describe the challenges related to their current school position. They admitted it was difficult to talk about these topics for fear of being perceived as complainers or ungrateful for the opportunities afforded to them. Notably, participants in this study who had lower percentages of students of color in their school tended to think more favorably of the NC SPG Accountability Model. It was also interesting to find that principals who worked in more progressive districts and communities seemed more optimistic about their chances to lead more diverse schools in the future.

Regardless of the school’s location or the community dynamics, a principal’s work is certainly demanding and will present challenges aligned with the unique needs of each school.

**Emergence of Additional Tenets of Critical Race Theory**

Although Interest Convergence and Permanence of Racism served as the primary tenets for this study, during the analysis of participant interview data and the review of literature, additional tenets of CRT surfaced as well: Counter-Storytelling, Whiteness as Property, and Critique of Liberalism. Although these additional tenets address different facets of systematic racism and the historical impact of race, it was not surprising to see them surface due to the complexities and pervasiveness of racism in the American culture.

Counter-Storytelling is a method of telling a story that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted racial stereotypes or myths (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Throughout American history, African-American males have been depicted as angry, hypersexual, sub-human creatures who pose a direct threat to the system of White supremacy. As highlighted in the literature review, mainstream media has played a pivotal role in perpetuating these negative stereotypes and myths
about the African-American male. Such negative stereotypes influence how others view as well as behave toward Black males. Many of the participants expressed extreme gratitude for having the opportunity to tell their stories and voiced great frustration with the current lack of diversity in the state of the principalship. In addition, participants were extremely frustrated with what they perceived as an unfair accountability model that disproportionately negatively impacts schools which tend to have higher percentages of students of color and students in poverty. Barry voiced his appreciation:

I am so glad that I had an opportunity to participate in this study and do my part in helping change the narrative about us [African-American male principals]. We have got to tell our own story and stop letting others who don’t even know us nor want to know us tell our stories for us.

Films and documentaries that portray African-American male principals as crusaders who can single-handedly turn around low-performing schools, such as the movie Lean On Me, serve to minimize or ignore the complexities these leaders often encounter in high-needs schools, thereby placing unrealistic expectations on them to act as miracle workers. While the principals in this study felt immense pride working with students who look like them, they clearly also believed that the NC SPG Accountability Model projected an inaccurate, or at the very least incomplete, picture of their school community and their effectiveness as school leaders.

The CRT tenet of Whiteness as Property argues that the privileges and advantages which White citizens in America have experienced for centuries must be viewed, treated, and protected as valuable property. During the era of slavery, slave masters realized that one of the most effective ways to keep African Americans in bondage was to attack them psychologically and make them feel their skin color was a fault. To this end, darker-skinned slaves were frequently
forced to work in the hot conditions of the field, while slaves with lighter complexions could work in the slave quarters and sometimes even alongside their slave master in the house. This dynamic resulted in a social hierarchy for lighter-skinned African Americans, who were often envied by those with darker complexions. I would argue that the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision not only reinforced the system of White privilege, but also disrupted the “house versus field” slave mentality that permeated the African-American community at that time, because it served as a reminder that even Blacks who could “pass” as Whites would not reap the benefits and advantages afforded to White citizens in America. Similarly, when looking at principal placement data along with data on funding, resources, and teacher quality, schools with higher percentages of students of color and students in poverty seem to continue struggling to compete for many of the basic elements needed to provide a high-quality education. Additionally, principals of these schools are consistently subjected to unequal conditions and discriminatory practices that imply their schools may not enjoy the same benefits as others with lower percentages of these student groups, which notably also tend to have White principals (Tillman, 2004).

Liberalism is a political doctrine founded on ideas of liberty and equality, which views protecting and enhancing the freedom of the individual as the central problem of politics. The Critique of Liberalism tenet of CRT challenges three basic notions underlying liberal legal ideology: colorblindness, neutrality of the law, and incremental change. Many of the participants in this study pointed out that they continue to face both covert and overt hiring practices, which they admitted discourage them from applying for the principalship at certain schools despite there being no laws to prevent them from doing so. Several principals described how they could easily predict the race of the new principal when a vacancy was filled in their district, based
solely on the school’s student demographics. This suggests that, rather than the candidate’s qualifications being the determinant, race is an all-too influential factor in the hiring of school principals, arguably the most influential factor. One of the most common covert practices used by hiring officials is the use of the term “fit” to justify hiring decisions and placements, a word which often is nothing more than coded language for hiring officials to sell the illusion of equal opportunity employment. When this term was used with study participants during their conversations with local hiring officials, unfortunately, none of them asked for an explanation of why they were or were not a good “fit” for the position. Every participant alluded to not wanting to upset the hiring officials or jeopardize their employment as the reason for not inquiring.

Figure 4.1 below illustrates how the five tenets of CRT emerged in this study. As indicated in the overview of the theoretical framework, Permanence of Racism and Interest Convergence served as the primary tenets of CRT in which the underrepresentation of African Americans in leadership would be examined. However, during the analysis of participant interview data it become event that additional tenets of CRT would surface. There were also interconnections between some of the tenets. For example, the tenet, Whiteness as Property surfaced when several of the participants talked about the fact that they believe that the current accountability model highlights the fact that they are not provided with the same opportunities and benefits as White principals. I connected these observations with the tenet Permanence of Racism because many of the principals in this study expressed concern that their recruitment and placement are often driven by factors associated with race.
Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 presented the results of the analysis of principal responses to the interview questions posed to explore issues of race and gender in the principalships. The findings of this study, based on the perspectives of the participants who were gracious enough to share their experiences, further highlight the continued work that confronts the nation when it comes to effectively addressing issues centered on race and equality. Chapter 5 follows to provide a summary and conclusion to address the issue of underrepresentation of African Americans in the teacher workforce and positions of educational leadership. Recommendations that local hiring officials should consider regarding the current hiring and placement trends of African-American male principals are also discussed.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Chapter Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of African-American male principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools in North Carolina regarding the perceived role of race in their recruitment, placement, and retention. This study also explored the impact that school accountability models such as the North Carolina School Performance Grade (NC SPG) initiative has had on these leaders, as well as the effects of such models on schools tending to serve higher percentages of students of color and students in poverty. Structured interviews were conducted with eight principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools across various North Carolina school districts. The following chapter consists of a summary of study findings, a review of literature/research as it relates to mutual benefits of Black educators working with students of color and students of other ethnic groups, recommendations to district superintendents and hiring officials, and implications for future research.

Summary of Findings

As indicated in the literature review and discussion of the theoretical framework, it is no secret that African Americans in this country have been subjected to a long and exhausting history of systematic racism. They have had to contend with and struggle to overcome oppressive institutions and laws, systems that not only sought to deny African Americans their basic human rights, but which also worked to maintain a system of White supremacy. As made evident by the participants in this study, race continues to play a significant role in the daily workplace experiences of African Americans in this country. Besides their marked influence on the opportunities these leaders had been afforded in their individual professional careers, issues
of race and racism were also revealed to have a key role in educational policies and accountability models such as the NC SPG. From the findings of this study, it seems that, for many, accountability models like the NC SPG have transformed the role of the principalship from the rewarding, prideful leadership experience it should be to one that leaves principals full of doubt and feelings of hopelessness. These emotions can often be passed down to others subconsciously, therefore resulting in an unrelenting cycle of psychological abuse (Okazaki, 2009). Delgado & Stefancic (2012) outlined the detrimental impact that systemic racism has on the psyche, stating, “It is common for victims of racial discrimination to suffer in silence or blame themselves for their predicament” (p. 49).

Although this study explored several layers of the issue regarding the underrepresentation of African Americans in school leadership, it was important to circle back to key points from the literature and previous research conducted on the issue of race and racism in this country. This would allow me to crystalize and contextualize the findings of this study through a critical race lens. Like strategies, policies, and coded language employed many years ago to dehumanize and suppress citizens of color, there appears to be a resurgence of similar ideologies in North Carolina. Accountability models that label schools which tend to have higher percentages of color and poverty as “low-performing” and “high-needs” serve to covertly and overtly communicate a message telling White students, parents, and communities to stay away from these types of schools. These models and coded language are designed to mask the real intentions of those who desire to divide citizens even more. Because of the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) decision, schools cannot “legally” segregate students based on race; however, some models appear to do so simply on a de facto basis. As Alexander (2012) stated, “We have not ended racial caste in America, we have merely redesigned it” (p. 2).
Mutual Benefit of Black Educators

As discussed earlier, mounting research contends that students of color may perform better in the classroom and be more likely to graduate from high school if their teacher looks like them (Boisrond, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2015; Will, 2017). Such research points to factors such as feeling more cared for, more interested in their schoolwork, and more confident in their teachers’ abilities to communicate with them (Rosen, 2017). These students also reported putting forth more effort in school and having higher college aspirations with teachers of their race or ethnicity (Boisrond, 2017; Griffin & Tackie, 2016; Milner, 2006; Will, 2017). Therefore, one could surmise that it would be in the best interests of officials to hire more teachers of color because of the growing ethnic diversity of our state. However, despite their impact, only 18% of teachers across the nation are African-American males (United States Department of Education, 2016).

One could surmise that one of the most effective strategies local districts could enact to increase the achievement of students of color would be to hire more educators of color. However, when examining this disparity through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), specifically through the tenet of Interest Convergence, it seems that hiring more educators of color and improving the quality of education for students of color does not serve the interests of those in power who seek to maintain the status quo. I believe that policies such as the NC SPG are designed to keep schools segregated by portraying the narrative that teachers serving in high-poverty, high-minority schools are ineffective, thus White students must not be subjected to such “inferior” institutions of learning. Such a claim begs the question: should citizens of color expect the same individuals who have created the system of power to change it, especially when they have served as the primary beneficiaries of the system? Historically, gains in civil rights and race
relations in this country tend to arise when they serve the economic, social, and political interests of those in power (Bell, 1980). Bell (1993) stated, “Because racism advances the interests of both White elites (materially) and working-class Caucasians (physically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (p. 49).

To tackle the wide diversity gap in the American teacher workforce, school principals should be strategic in their recruitment of teachers and placement of students. However, it is important that principals do not create or perpetuate a culture in which teachers of color are shoehorned into the role of disciplinarian or counselor, nor should principals assume that a match in racial identity guarantees a positive experience for students. In Griffin and Tackie’s (2016) report, African-American educators expressed frustration with the heavy burden often placed on them by fellow colleagues and administrators. Far too frequently, these teachers are given the responsibility of instructing students who may demonstrate disciplinary challenges, with students’ frustrations and behaviors often being rooted in academic challenges, issues with the quality of instruction they receive, and the lack of connection they feel with teachers who rarely look like them. It should be noted that, because they are often viewed and treated as “behavior problems,” such students are typically assigned to teachers perceived as strong disciplinarians—that is, Black teachers—who can manage these students’ behavior. As a result, these African-American teachers are not frequently given the opportunity to teach students who achieve at other, higher performance levels.

**Recommendations from the Study**

**Recommendations for Education Practice**

Although the underrepresentation of African-American males in education leadership appears heavily driven by the impact of race and systemic racism, I believe that local
superintendents and hiring officials should consider taking the actions suggested below to help address this national problem. Initially, I planned to outline the recommendations by separate categories to address each area of the study. However, after much reflection, I concluded that many of the recommendations intersect the recruitment, placement, and retention of African-American male principals. For example, it is evident that due to the unique challenges centered on race and systematic racism faced by African-American principals, it is critical that these leaders be provided with networks of support and mentorship. These supports could not only assist in the retention of these principals but could also be an effective strategy for recruiting more African-American males to the principalship. Additionally, these recommendations assume that those in power are open to changing the current structures and policies in an education system which has historically marginalized citizens of color. My recommendations are:

- District superintendents and hiring officials need to be willing to facilitate, engage in, and establish a culture that promotes collaborative conversations centered on promoting policies for equity.
- District superintendents and hiring officials should adopt transparent hiring practices that promote equity and diversity.
- School districts should provide African-American male principals in high-poverty, high-minority schools with a safe space to create networks of support and/or mentorship for themselves.

**Policies to promote equity.** Since the establishment of the first superintendent in 1837 in Buffalo, New York, the role and influence of the superintendent has evolved from that of an overseer of schools to a leader of complex ecosystem of various competing interests (Kowalski, 2013). One of the most important roles of the superintendent is to establish and communicate a
clear vision and ensure that the proper systems and structures are in place and aligned. These leaders also need to possess the necessary skillsets and courage to confront systems and practices that may be difficult to address, since conversations centered on race can be, and often are, very uncomfortable and sometimes divisive. Such issues have the potential to conjure up deep-rooted emotions and beliefs about the ways in which racial issues intersect multiple facets of daily life. Discussions about race also have the potential to reveal racist beliefs that may be subconsciously held. However, if citizens in this country want to make progress improving national race relations and breaking down the many barriers between racial groups, it is critical they engage in dialogue that will confront the brutal realities of systemic racism and focus attention on the things which bond human beings.

**Transparent and equitable hiring practices.** It is important that superintendents and hiring officials acknowledge many of the covert hiring practices that steer many African-American principals from working in certain schools and communities, or which prevent them from seeking specific opportunities in education. According to a recent study, discriminatory hiring practices against African Americans have not declined in the last 25 years. Quillian et al. (2017) performed a meta-analysis of available field experiments conducted since 1990 pertaining to racial discrimination in hiring. The study involved analyzing data from 24 field studies, including more than 55,000 applications across more than 26,000 positions. By examining the rates of callbacks or invitations to participate in job interviews for White and non-White applicants with equivalent qualifications, they found that, since 1990, White applicants received 36% more callbacks on average than Black applicants, and 24% more callbacks than Latino applicants with identical resumes (Quillian et al., 2017).
One example of how to promote equality in hiring practices can be seen in the National Football League’s (NFL) Rooney Rule, a policy requiring all teams to interview at least one minority candidate for head coaching and senior football operation openings. Named after the former owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers who also served as the chairman of the NFL’s diversity committee, the Rooney Rule was created in 2002 after two African-American head coaches, Tony Dungy of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Dennis Green of the Minnesota Vikings, were fired, leaving only two non-White head coaches in the NFL. Since Dungy had a winning record when he was terminated, and Green was fired during his first losing season after a 10-year winning streak, the firings drew the attention of civil rights activists (Duru, 2011). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 explicitly "prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin". Shortly afterwards, United States civil rights attorneys Cyrus Mehri and Johnnie Cochran released a report showing that, despite winning a higher percentage of games, Black head coaches were less likely to be hired and more likely to be fired than their White counterparts. The Rooney Rule was subsequently established to require NFL teams to interview at least one minority candidate for head coaching vacancies (Duru, 2011).

Prior to the enactment of the Rooney Rule, between 1971 and 2002, the NFL hired only six African-American men as head coaches. However, since the Rooney Rule, 17 African Americans have been hired as head coaches (Rider, Wade, Swaminathan, & Schwab, 2016). While in some regards African Americans have made tremendous progress in gaining access to head coaching positions, one cannot overlook the fact that 100% of all NFL owners are White. Thus, while more work must be done to refine the current structure of the NFL’s Rooney Rule, it does provide a very simple guideline that districts across North Carolina could immediately adopt. Such a policy would require local officials to be more accountable in ensuring equitable
hiring practices while also placing a degree of responsibility on African-American candidates to apply for job vacancies they may otherwise be hesitant to even attempt for fear of discrimination.

**Mentorship and support for African-American principals.** Because of the growing diversity of student populations, it is arguable that the recruitment and retention of African-American male principals is an integral part of the long-term success of North Carolina schools. Based on the perspectives provided by the participants in this study and a review of the literature, it is evident that African-American male principals in this country encounter challenges centered on race and systematic racism. In light of these unique challenges, it is important that these leaders not only participate in and/or steer the recruitment of fellow African-American principals, but that they also create networks of support and mentorship for current and aspiring principals. Structured and intentional mentoring can have a positive impact on not just the mentee, but on the mentor as well. These mentors are not only provided with the opportunity to share valuable life lessons and help their mentees to share sensitive issues centered on race and systematic racism with which they themselves may have firsthand experience (Sanchez et al., 2008).

**Recommendations for Education Policy**

There is no doubt that politics and policy are often intertwined in the formation of local, state, and national level educational policy (Cooper, Cibuka, & Fusarelli, 2015). It is also likely that policies introduced to address discriminatory policies or replace outdated policies that challenge the status quo may cause tension in organizations. Such policies may furthermore lead the organization’s members to question if they are living up to the established values, core beliefs, and mission. Successful organizations not only recognize the need for evolution, but they also realize that evolution is a necessity in the long-term success of their organization. Bolman
and Deal (2008) outline four frames through which effective organizations view and respond to barriers to their success. These frames offer different perspectives on the way in which the organization’s challenges should be viewed and question the traditional methods in which organizations typically respond in times of crisis. These four basic frames include the structural frame, the human resources frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame. With the current challenges North Carolina continues to face in the underrepresentation of teachers and leaders of color in public education, along with the disproportionately negative impact of the current accountability model on certain types of schools, policymakers need to carefully craft solutions through these four basic frames. The two recommendations below will require that policymakers reassess the current design of teacher preparation programs from various colleges and universities across the state and reconsider the merits of the current accountability model. A core question about the NC SPG Accountability Model is whether it serves the best interests of the citizens, students, and educators of the state’s public-school system. I recommend that policymakers should act as follows:

- College and university leaders should redesign teacher preparation programs and infuse more culturally-enriched pedagogy, theory, and curricula to ensure that teachers are better equipped to instruct students of color.
- State legislators should adopt an equitable, balanced accountability model that places equal weight on student achievement and student growth.

**Redesigning college and university teacher preparation programs.** Due to the growing diversity of the United States, it is critical that colleges and universities around the country closely examine their teacher preparation programs to determine if they are adequately preparing aspiring educators to effectively meet the needs of the students they serve. Ladson-
Billings (2000) argues that one cannot ignore the profound affect of the displacement and reassignment of African-American teachers from segregated Black schools to integrated schools on discussions centered on race. She argues that Black teachers felt more comfortable discussing issues of race and racism in classrooms with all African-American students, adding that African-American students come into classrooms and schools with unique cultural experiences which should be embraced and recognized (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

The redesigning of teacher preparation programs should not simply entail adding more courses on African-American history, but instead should infuse an array of learning experiences that will help prospective educators develop a stronger appreciation and understanding of African-American culture. Historically, the preparation of American teachers seems to approach the education of Black children as a one-size-fits-all program that aims to assimilate Black children to one ideal American model (Olneck, 2004). Therefore, one could surmise that many of the students graduating from various universities and colleges may be entering schools with an incomplete and/or inaccurate idea of what it means to educate students of color. For prospective teachers to be better equipped with the tools and knowledge to educate African-American students, they must be exposed to authentic pre-service field experiences, find ways to connect their formal training and experiences to the community in which they will be serving, and approach the task of educating students of color with an open mindset centered on growth. Also, as Ladson-Billings (2000) suggests, colleges and universities should reassess their admissions procedures, reexamine course work, and implement policies and practices to recruit and retain African-American scholars.

**Adopting a more balanced, equitable accountability model.** This study’s findings provide evidence that accountability models such as the NC SPG disproportionately and
negatively impact high-poverty, high-minority schools. In response to this disparity, many have called for a more balanced formula that places equal weight on student growth and student achievement. An interactive map created by Antoszyk (2015) illustrates what would happen to the SPGs across the state with various percentages of emphasis placed on growth versus achievement. Based on a 50/50 model, as compared to the current 80/20 model, the number of high-poverty, high-minority schools that receive SPGs of “D” or “F” would decrease significantly. In fact, when placed on a 50/50 model of proficiency/growth, the number of schools assigned a grade of “F” decreased approximately 95%, from 102 to just 7 schools. Even more interesting, there are multiple schools with assigned performance grades of “A” or “B” that would see slight decreases in overall school performance if increased emphasis were placed on student growth.

A more balanced accountability model could tremendously assist principals who serve in high-poverty, high-minority school with the areas of teacher recruitment and retention. It would allow these principals to take more pride in serving their high-needs schools and not feel as though such assignments would be detrimental to their careers. Students and members of the community, moreover, could feel more optimistic about the quality of education youth are receiving there. This, in return, could encourage parents and key community stakeholders to take an active role in the improvement process of the school.

**Implications for Future Research**

Several areas for further research were revealed from this study’s findings, including investigations into other states’ accountability models and the experiences of African-American principals at schools that are not high-minority, high-needs schools. For example, further research could be conducted with other African-American male elementary principals in states...
that have adopted similar accountability models based on school performance grades, as a means of assessing whether the issues with the NC SPG model are specific to North Carolina. Additionally, studies performed with African-American male principals of non-high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools would enable an assessment of whether the influence of race and racism is present to the same degree as indicated by the experiences of this study’s participants.

Moreover, while extensive research has been done to study the leadership styles of African-American principals and the impact of African-American teachers on student achievement, further research on the impact of African-American principals on students of color could provide added insight into how students may benefit from leaders who share their race or ethnicity. As stated earlier in this study, a school’s principal is an important piece of its success, hence selecting the right person is a critical decision for any local official in charge of hiring these individuals. These principals may not have the same level of daily interaction with students as with teachers, but their individual belief systems and standards will be passed on to students through the teachers who instruct them every day.

Although the current study focused primarily on the perspectives and lived experiences of African-American males who lead certain types of schools, additional research could build on this research by exploring the perspectives of superintendents and hiring officials to gather insights into factors they consider when making hiring decisions or placing African-American male principals at select schools. This would help to provide some additional context into the hiring practices of these officials and illuminate whether the factors they consider when making hiring decisions align with those of African-American male principals.
Chapter Summary

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, African-American males in this country continue to encounter obstacles and barriers connected directly to their race. For centuries, African Americans in this country have endured unfair policies and laws that have not only made it more difficult for them to achieve considerable progress, but which have also sought to oppress them as second-class citizens to maintain a system of racism and dominance. Arguably, the struggles that African Americans continue to experience in this country are not a product of mere coincidence, nor are they due to a racially-based lack of work ethic as some may suggest. Rather, the challenges endured by African Americans today are the culmination and residual effects of a sophisticated strategy intentionally designed to oppress them in multiple sociocultural and political arenas. Racism has clearly affected African Americans’ living conditions related to housing, politics, the labor market, healthcare, and education, yet I contend the most damaging part of systemic racism has been its emotional and psychological impact on African Americans.

What makes these two determinants so devastating is the fact that they can be subconsciously passed down through generations. Leary (2005) developed the theory of Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome after collecting and analyzing 12 years of quantitative and qualitative research from both the United States and Africa, providing keen insights into the generational impact of the American slave trade on the Africans who were taken from their homelands to a strange country. She also paints a vivid picture of how the residual effects of slavery and racism continue to plague the United States today (Leary, 2005).

Although this study focused primarily on exploring the lived experiences of a group of African-American male principals serving in rural high-needs schools in North Carolina, its
findings have far greater implications. The stories shared by the participants of this study are only a part of the story for millions of citizens of color in this country. Historically, African Americans and other groups of color have been subjected to others controlling their narrative, which has often resulted in negative stereotypes and images of them being portrayed to the masses. To counter the often-told narrative, African Americans in this country must combine their collective efforts to take back their stories. By collecting and analyzing the personal stories of Blacks on race-related issues, qualitative studies like this one can help African Americans move toward achieving such an end. Such research can provide insights that might be used to inform research, practice, and policy in serving as a catalyst for true reform in the field of education and beyond.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Participant Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this Pre-Interview Survey is to gather critical background and demographic information on interview participants and determine a location, data, and time for a confidential interview.

Prior to completing the Pre-Interview Survey, you will be asked to review the Participant Consent Form. After reading the consent form, you will be asked to select whether or not you wish to participate in this study.

1. What is your age?
   ___30 or younger  ___31-35  ___36-40  ___41-45  ___46-50  ___50 or older

2. How long have you been a principal? (Do not include your time as an Assistant Principal?)
   ___1-3 years  ___4-10 years  ___10-20 years  ___20 years or more

3. How long have you been the principal at your current school?
   ___1-3 years  ___4-10 years  ___10-20 years  ___20 years or more

4. Is this the first school in which you have served as principal that has a student population this is high-poverty (at least 50% of students receive free/reduced price lunch) and high-minority (at least 50% of students are African-American and/or Hispanic)?
   ___Yes   ___No

5. How many previous schools have you served as the principal that were high-poverty (at least 50% of students receive free/reduced price lunch) and high-minority (at least 50% of students are African American and/or Hispanic)?
   ___1  ___2  ___3  ___4 or more

6. Are you familiar with the current formula structure of the North Carolina School Performance Grade Accountability Model (80% proficiency and 20% growth)?
   ___Yes   ___No

7. One the areas this study will address participant's perception of whether or not they feel that their current placement impacts future career advancement opportunities. How do you as a principal define "career advancement?"

8. Please indicate a date, time, and location for a confidential interview.

9. Please provide your name and email address. This information will be used solely for me to identify participants during the data collection and analysis steps. He will also use this information to follow up with participants to coordinate the logistics for participant interviews.
Appendix B: Participant Informed Consent

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH


Principal Investigator: Kendrick Ray Alston
Faculty Sponsor: Lisa Bass, Ph.D.

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form, you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the unique perspectives of African-American male principals in four rural high-poverty, high-minority school districts, regarding future career advancement opportunities and the internal and external challenges they encounter as a result of the compliance and accountability components of the North Carolina School Performance Grade accountability model. Unintended consequences of desegregation have contributed to creating a culture in which African-American male educators come to view the opportunity to lead schools that are majority African American as a hindrance in their career advance aspirations.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

Preliminary Survey. Preliminary Surveys will be conducted prior to each participant interview. This survey will be created through Qualtrics and sent to each interview participant electronically. The purpose of this survey is to gather critical background information from each study participant and determine a location in which he feels most comfortable in conducting the interview. The results of the survey will be stored in Qualtrics and exported in a secure Google folder during the analysis stage.

Interview Participation. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will be either face-to-face, phone, or virtual. The interview will last no more than 60 minutes. All interviews will be recorded to ensure accuracy during the transcription process. Upon
completion of interviews participants will be provided with a copy of interview transcription to review for accuracy. Follow up interviews will be conducted with participants as needed.

**Risks.** Issues centered on race can oftentimes be uncomfortable and controversial. During the study, participants will be asked questions regarding their employment, experiences, and opinions about their employment as related to race. Due to the disproportionate number of African-American males at elementary schools, there is higher probability that participants could be identified. As a result, the scope of the survey will not be limited to specific districts of North Carolina. Preliminary survey data could possibly be subject to hacking as any online user could be. However, the researcher's Qualtrics survey account is password-protected.

**Benefits.** Although, there are no direct benefits to your participation in the research, there are several indirect benefits that could result from the research and findings of this study. The indirect benefits include the increased attention and awareness to the issue of the underrepresentation of African-American male principals and their disproportionate placement in high-poverty, high-minority schools. It can also provide policymakers and those in charge of hiring with valuable insight into the unique perspective of African-American male principals regarding the impact of the North Carolina School Performance Grade Accountability Model on their future career advancement opportunities.

**Confidentiality.** The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in a folder in the researcher's Google drive. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to the study. During the data collection and coding process, pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of research participants and school districts. Participants will be assigned unique codes that will be sent to them for Pre-Interview Surveys. These codes will be recorded on the researcher's secured and password-protected data accounting log that will be housed in the researcher's Google Drive.

**Compensation.** You will not receive anything for participating in this study.

*What if you are a NCSU student?*

Participation in this study is not a course requirement, and your participation or lack thereof will not affect your class standing or grades at NCSU.

*What if you are a NCSU employee?*

Participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment at NCSU, and your participation or lack thereof will not affect your job.

*What if you have questions about this study?*

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Kendrick Alston at xxxx@ncsu.edu, or (xxx) xxx-xxxx.
What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator at xxxx@ncsu.edu or by phone at (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

Consent to Participate

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.

Subject's signature: _________________________________________  Date: ______________

Investigator’s signature: _____________________________________  Date: ______________
Appendix C: Study Interview Protocol


Interview Protocol

Introduction: Thank you all for taking the time out of your schedules to be here today. I value your time and promise not to go over the allotted time. My name is Kendrick Alston and I am a doctoral student at N.C. State University. I am conducting a study that is designed to gather the perspectives of African-American male principals of rural high-poverty, high minority elementary schools regarding the impact of the North Carolina School Performance Grade Accountability Model on future career advancement. As a current principal of a high-poverty, high-minority elementary school myself, I am very intrigued to hear the prospective of my fellow colleagues across the state regarding this topic.

Before we begin, I’d like to go over a few disclosures with you.

(Read the below study disclosures aloud to participant.)

• Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your decision to participate in this study, to not participate, or to stop participating at any time.
• The session will be digitally recorded to have a complete record of our discussion. The discussion will be kept completely confidential; any information obtained from you that can identify you will be disclosed only with your permission. I will use code numbers in the management and analysis of the focus group data, and your name will not be associated with any discussion results.
• I expect participant interviews to last about 30-45 minutes each.

(Turn on recorder. Read the below statement at beginning of recording.)
This is Kendrick Alston, interviewing [Participant Name/Role] on [Date] at [School Name/Interview Location].

Start the Interview
(Read the following statements and questions in order, giving the participant plenty of time to contemplate and respond.)

The first set of questions are designed to provide me with insight into the professional journey of participants. Please begin by telling me your name.

1. What is your current role and how long have you been at this school?
2. Discuss your path to the principalship?
3. What factors influenced your decision to go into education?
4. What motivates you to stay in the field?

The next set of questions will address this study’s Research Question 2, which asks, “How do African-American male principals of rural elementary high-minority, high-poverty schools describe the internal and external factors influencing their decision to apply for or their placement at certain schools?”
5. Were you placed at the school where you work, or did you apply there?
   a. Hired: What factors did you take into consideration when you applied for this
      principalship?
   b. Placed: What factors do you believe were considered by local officials in charge of
      hiring and placement of principals when you were placed at this school?
6. Do you feel as though you’ve been coached into your current role by your district?
7. In what ways, if any, does the current structure of the North Carolina School Performance
   Grade Accountability Model encourage you to apply for high-poverty, high-minority schools
   in the future? Discourage?
8. In what ways, if any, do you perceive the job of principals who lead schools that have School
   Performance Grades of A or B less challenging than yours? More challenging?

The next three questions will address Research Question 3, which is: How do African-American male
 principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the impact their placement
 will have on future career advancement?

9. In what ways, if any, do you feel that your current placement may hinder future career
   advancement opportunities? Enhance future career advancement opportunities?
10. Do you believe race place a role in principal placement? What makes you say this?
11. As the principal of this school, in what ways, if any, has district leaders conveyed to you the
    amount of time you will be provided to boost student achievement?

The last two questions will address Research Question 4, which is: How do African-American male
 principals of rural, high-poverty, high-minority elementary schools describe the pressures that result from
 the current proficiency and growth formula of North Carolina’s School Performance Grade North
 Carolina School Performance Grade Accountability Model?

12. In what ways, if any, has the North Carolina School Performance Grade Accountability
     Model had a negative impact on the school curriculum focus? Positive impact on the school
     curriculum focus?
13. In what ways, if any, has the current structure of the North Carolina School Performance
     Grade Accountability Model made your placement in a school that high minority more
     satisfying? Dissatisfying?

That concludes our interview. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to
 participate.