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# I AM My Sister's Keeper: Considering the Experiences of African American Women Educators Working in Predominantly White Public School Systems

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AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN EDUCATORS

I AM MY SISTER'S KEEPER: CONSIDERING THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN WOMEN EDUCATORS WORKING IN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE  
PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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### Abstract

The stories of African American women educators are often not dominant narratives in the field of education. Scholarly readings often overlook, discard, or omit the perspectives and voices of African American women educators (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003); Mabokela & Madsen, 2007; Patton & Catching, 2009; Revere, 1986).

Furthermore, stereotypes, misrepresentations, and misgivings about African American women are abundant in popular press and media. This dissertation served as an outlet to present the authentic storytelling of ten African American women educators (N=10) in their voices and own words. The historical omission of the voices of African American women has had wide-reaching, explicit, and inadvertent consequences. The outcomes, impact, and meaning that I and other African American women educators ascribed to this treatment was explored using Critical Race Theory framework and methodology. This study sought to explore the experiences of African American women educators through their awareness of *double consciousness* and being in a *crooked room* and the impact thereof as they navigate their school environments. The results indicated the following four primary themes: 1) African American women educators encounter expressions of racism in their schools; 2) African American women adjust their behavior to fit within their school environments; 3) African American women face additional barriers when gaining access to and navigating their roles in predominantly white schools; and 4) African American women educators possess skills and traits that promote success.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

*In attempting to analyze the situation of the Black woman in America, one crashes abruptly into a solid wall of grave misconceptions, outright distortions of fact, and defensive attitudes on the part of many. (Beale, 2005, p. 109)*

The above quote speaks to some of the challenges often experienced by scholars who undertake the task of sharing the experiences of African American women. During my journey through the doctoral program, I was asked by many seemingly interested parties to describe my dissertation research. After someone asked me what my dissertation was about and I told them, I observed varying responses ranging from apparent discomfort (“oh, that’s nice” followed by a quick change in the topic of conversation) to sincere interest. In the middle of this continuum of responses were the puzzled, questioning, and challenging reactions of people who were not familiar with addressing the significance of race in education.

My experiences with some people in this area of the spectrum presented varying degrees of opposition. Expressions of opposition were manifested in varying ways: others believing that perhaps I was making race a bigger issue than it “really” was or as people expressed that they were uncomfortable with talking about race in such a direct manner. Still others shared that they just really did not understand how and why race was a relevant factor. As such, I was presented with numerous opportunities to practice formulating a response that would justify to others my interest in this topic and the relevance of exploring the experiences of African American women educators.

In the United States of America today, there exists a discrepancy in the overall academic achievement of African American students as a group in comparison to their white peers. Educators have tried to understand this discrepancy for quite some time. Murphy (2006) traced the attention achievement gap data have received back to the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement. There has been some success in determining factors that affect the achievement gap (e.g., student demographics, school resources, student factors). This current study did not aim to address the multitude of factors that impact the achievement gap; rather it focused on one portion of one of these factors in the area of school climate. Specifically, the study focused on bringing attention and consideration to the experiences of African American women educators. African American educators are gaining more attention in educational literature, often in conjunction with educational leaders and political communities recognizing the specific challenges faced by African American students, in addition to and searching for ways to address these challenges (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Wines, Nelson, & Watts, 2015).

National statistics on teacher demographics indicate an imbalance in the representation of teachers of color in comparison to students of color (Boser, 2011). In a recent report on teacher diversity, the Center for American Progress found that “students of color make up almost half of the public school population, however teachers of color represent only 18 percent of the teaching profession” (Boser, 2014, p. 2). Demographic data specific to Missouri, where this study was conducted, indicated an unequal representation between the African American student population (17%) and African American teachers (7%). This imbalance can have an impact on school communities and



in particular on students of color and teachers of color. The Center for American Progress found that “students of color do better on a variety of measures if they’re taught by teachers of color” and “teachers of color serve as role models for students, giving them a clear and concrete sense of what diversity in education - and our society - looks like” (Boser, 2011, p. 1). Despite evidence of the reported benefit of increasing teacher diversity in public school settings, there is clearly an underrepresentation of teachers of color in the education profession.

By going through the process of forming responses to the misconceptions, distortions, and defensive attitudes that Beale (2005) reflected upon and engaging in deep introspection, my resolve has been fortified. As I delved into the process of working on my dissertation, I reflected more and more on my own story as an African American woman educator. In doing so, I considered the significance storytelling holds for me. In the process of growing this dissertation from the idea stage through revising multiple drafts, I have engaged in my own form of storytelling and as a result, my voice has become strengthened. In early drafts of this dissertation, I engaged in the need to justify this research in terms of making my study fit into pre-existing research that viewed race through a deficit model (Urban, 2009). I aimed to use this study to provide a platform from which authentic stories of African American women educators could be shared - not just in response to a problem, not in a defensive manner, but simply a space for voices to be heard and experiences to be recognized and valued for their unique perspectives.

The stories of African American women educators are not dominant narratives in the field of education (Bryant, R. M., Coker, A. D., Durodoye, B.A., McCollum, V. J., Constantine, M.G., Pack-Brown, S., & O’ Bryant, B. J., 2005; Coker, 2011). Scholarly

readings often overlook, discard, or omit the perspectives and voices of African American women educators (Harris-Perry, 2011). Furthermore, stereotypes, misrepresentations, and misgivings about African American women are abundant in popular press and media (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The combination of these two occurrences sets the stage for continued marginalization. As an African American woman educator, I have become more and more aware of how my own voice has been silenced. My voice has been undervalued and overridden by the others – in both intentionally malicious manners as well as in non-deliberate ways. This dissertation provided an outlet to present the authentic storytelling of African American women educators, author included, in their own voices and own words. The omission of the voices of African American women has wide-reaching, explicit, and inadvertent consequences. The outcomes, impact, and meaning that I, and other African American women educators ascribed to this treatment was explored in this dissertation.

### **Problem Statement**

African American women working in educational settings face unique challenges and thus have distinct experiences that may impact their roles, responsibilities, and interactions with others in that setting (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Bryant, 2005; Mabokela & Madsen, 2007; Patton & Catching, 2009; Revere, 1986). The unique experiences of Black people living in America were explicated when W.E.B. DuBois referred to a “double consciousness” that is frequently experienced by Black people; “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others...” (Dubois, 1903, p. 364), or when contemporary scholar Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) discussed the idea of

the “crooked room” as it applies to Black women. The idea of the crooked room refers to the widely used and accepted stereotypes of distorted gender and racial expectations placed on Black women and the subsequent oppression that occurs as a result of those stereotypes. An in-depth description of the crooked room is detailed in Chapter Two. Given the dearth of information, especially in educational literature, this study aimed to explain the experiences of African American women educators within the “crooked” spaces of public school settings.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of African American women educators in the context of the crooked room. This was done in the context of exploring responsibilities, opportunities, and interactions that African American women educators have with others within public schools. This study sought to deepen the understanding of experiences of African American women within educational settings by exploring the encounters of several educators as they present their awareness of double consciousness and being in a crooked room and the implications thereof on their citizenship, recognition, and fit within their school culture.

The present study aimed to answer the primary research question: How do African American women educators experience being in a crooked room? This research question was structured to specifically garner the voices of African American women educators and allowed for the creation of a platform where the unique experiences of this select group can be regarded and valued. Additionally, this study addressed two important supplemental research questions: (a) How are African American women impacted by navigating both formal and informal roles within school systems? (b) How

do African American women educators successfully navigate their work in the public school system?

By addressing these research questions, information gathered may help inform the professional and personal practices of African American women educators. Current literature did not offer information or present considerations on the distinctive experiences of African American women educators, nor did it expound upon the *need* to understand the context and experiences of African American women educators as they impact a multitude of areas of importance to school counselors (consultation, student performance, school culture). This study aimed to add to the school counseling literature regarding African American women educators through presenting the unique challenges and experiences of this group, ultimately providing an enhanced understanding which may benefit consultation and collaboration practices.

### **Brief Historical Context**

When considering the current educational situation of African American women, it is important to consider historical perspective. I started with a broad lens of examining educational opportunities for women, African Americans, and then focused more specifically on African American women as a unique population. Sexton (1976) described the historical purpose of education for women:

Historically, the education of women has been fashioned around the tasks and roles they perform in society, just as male education has been. The roles of women, almost to the present day, have been limited chiefly to domestic ones—the bearing and rearing of children, cooking, making clothing, and keeping house. It has been assumed that these domestic

tasks are so simple to perform, and so easy to pass on from one generation to the next, that they require no special preparation, knowledge, or schooling. Given these roles and these views of the limited complexity- and social contribution- of the roles, it is little wonder that the education of women, almost until the modern period, has been so universally neglected. (Sexton, 1976, p. 23)

This description portrays the purpose of education for women as a broad category and the limited views of educational opportunity. The primary purpose of the early education of women was to prepare them to be proper caregivers. Sexton acknowledged that women who had economic means were able to engage in furthering their education beyond preparation for domestic duties. “Women of rank and leisure have, in some societies at least, developed interests and knowledge extending beyond the strictly domestic duties” (Sexton, 1976, p. 23).

Educational experiences were limited for women as students as well as leaders in education. School leadership has historically been male dominated. Sexton makes the link between educational inequality and the lack of women in leadership positions.

Probably the chief source of inequality in elementary and secondary education is found not in the classroom but in the fact that administration and school leadership at all levels has been dominated by males. School administration, local and state boards of education, the U.S. Office of Education, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, administration and governing boards in higher education, and virtually all groups that make or affect policy in the elementary and

secondary schools, are overwhelmingly led and staffed at the highest levels by males. Among the leadership of these policy-making groups women are present only in token numbers or at relatively low policy levels. (Sexton, 1976, p. 55)

The most recent publication on school administration demographics from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) pointed out that women have never made up the majority of school district superintendents - of the respondents participating in this 2010 AASA study, 24.1% were women (Kowalski, 2011). Reflecting on the role of school district superintendents to set the tone for the climate of the school system, it is important to consider the direct and indirect consequences of having a lack of women visible in this crucial leadership role.

African Americans have had limited access to education in the United States. According to Sexton (1976), education served the purpose of preparing its recipients for their future work. In this sense, African Americans were limited in their education because of the restricted roles in the work they were able to access. Historically, legislation impacted African Americans' access to education as well. As Ladson-Billings (2009) stated:

No challenge has been more daunting than that of improving the academic achievement of African American students. Burdened with a history that includes the denial of education, separate and unequal education, and relegation to unsafe, substandard inner-city schools, the quest for quality

education remains an elusive dream for the African American community.

(p. xv)

With examples ranging from the prohibition of educating slaves to sanctioned segregation, racial inequities in education are apparent in the history of education in the United States. It is critical to understand the impact of the historical perspective as it relates to the access African Americans have to education. Exposing this relationship is key to fully comprehending the current status of African Americans in educational contexts. A more extensive review of the historical milieu of African Americans is presented in Chapter Two.

Recent studies in the field of education have begun to focus more attention on the diversity and the lack thereof in educators—particularly in leadership positions. There remains a dearth of information, however, about the convergence of gender and racial inequities experienced by African American women educators. This is evident in the reporting of statistics on teacher demographics that often present single demographic characteristics: women comprise the majority of teachers—about 76% of the teaching work force; African Americans represent approximately 6.8% of teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Unveiling demographic statistics on higher level administration positions becomes even more challenging, yet is important to review these statistics, as it is at the administrative levels that institutional policies are made. The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that approximately 63.3% of education administrators were women and 13.1% of the total number were African American (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2014). In a study of over 2,000 superintendents, only 6% of superintendents identified as non-white (Kowalski, 2011).

Considering the overall history of male dominance in education and the trend of continued male dominance in school leadership, as well as the underrepresentation of African American educators, it is critical to interject stories that illuminate the intersection of race and gender inequities experienced by African American women educators. African American women have been effectively omitted from having their viewpoints and experiences shared and heard, resulting in the stories and experiences of women being consistently overlooked and under-emphasized (Tillman, 2009). Despite the absence of influential African American women in mainstream educational history, diligent historical digging turned up a small number of accounts that have been documented and preserved. Three such noteworthy stories are presented below.

“But oh, how inexpressibly bitter and agonizing it is to feel oneself an outcast from the rest of mankind, as we are in this country!” (Forten, 1981, p. 91). Charlotte Forten was the first northern African American schoolteacher to go south to teach former enslaved Africans. She is most known for her diaries which gave first-hand accounts of experiences teaching and advocating for social justice. Forten’s diary entries attested to her belief in the opportunities education would afford African Americans. She also recognized the important responsibility she had in providing educational opportunities for other African Americans. “It is well that they should know what one of their own color could do for his race. I long to inspire them with courage and ambition (of a noble sort), and high purpose” (Forten, 1981, p. 150).

Anna Julia Cooper, recognized as an early Black Feminist, in her early, post-slavery writings, reflected on the absence of the voices of African American women in America. “The ‘other side’ has not been represented by the one who ‘lives there’. And



not many can more sensibly realize and more accurately tell the weight and the fret of the ‘long dull pain’ than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America” (Cooper, 1998, p. 4). In this quote, Cooper captured the essence of the paradox faced by African American women: their voices are most needed to speak to inequalities and how to best address them, but it is due to these inequalities that they were robbed of their opportunity to speak. This passage portrayed, that as early as 1892, there was a realization among African American women educators that there is a need to include their voices, yet there remained no place for this (Cooper, 1998).

Collins (2000) provided recognition to the intellectual tradition of African American women, their contributions, and noted the importance of the voices of these women; [there were] “times when Black women’s voices were strong, and others when assuming a more muted tone was essential” (Collins, 2000, p. 5). From a feminist context, Collins (2000) reflected on the experiences of Maria Stewart, a former domestic servant who went on to become a teacher and activist: “Many Maria Stewarts exist, African-American women whose minds and talents have been suppressed by the pots and kettles symbolic of Black women’s subordination” (p. 4).

### **Specific Relevance to School Counseling**

Educational reform efforts such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, as well as professional organizations such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2003), have recognized the need for the nation’s schools to address the needs of all students and in particular, students in underperforming and marginalized groups.

The ASCA National Model provides a framework for school counseling programs in which the responsibilities of school counselors are clearly outlined. As part of the

system supports for a comprehensive counseling program, school counselors provide direct services, wherein counselors work in direct contact with students, as well as indirect services that support student learning and performance. Within this subset of indirect responsibilities, school counselors are called to provide consultation as an important contribution to the school system. “Counselors must consult with teachers, staff members and parents or guardians regularly in order to provide information, to support the school community and to receive feedback on the emerging needs of students” (ASCA, 2003, p. 42). Further supporting this concept, Erchel and Martens (2006) noted that “consultation is an indirect model of delivering psychological services. Within this model, a specialist (consultant) and staff member (consultee) work together to optimize the functioning of a client (student) in the staff member’s setting and to increase the staff member’s capacity to deal with similar situations in the future” (p. vii). For the purpose of this paper, discussion surrounding consultation pertained primarily to the consultation between teachers and staff members, as these aspects of consultation most directly related the culture of the school system.

It is important to note the traditional views of collaboration and consultation in order to better understand the impact and significance for school counselors and, more specifically, African American school counselors and other educators. Collaborative consultation, is defined as “a process in which a trained, school-based consultant, working in an egalitarian, nonhierarchical relationship with a consultee, assists that person in her efforts to make decisions and carry out plans that will be in the best interest of her students” (Kampwirth, 2006, p. 3). Embedded in this definition of consultation is a key concept of power, as evidenced by the reference to “egalitarian” and “non-

hierarchical” that require further exploration as it relates to the experiences of African American women educators.

In addition to the importance of the presence of power dynamics in the consultative relationship, it is equally important to note the absence of mention of issues of race in the consultative relationship, as they constitute another layer of power differentials. This “colorblind” approach to consultation downplays the significance of race and further marginalizes African American women educators and discounts their experiences.

School counselors are often sought out as consultants, both formally and informally. Baker and Gerler (2008) pointed out that consultees are naturally drawn to school counselors for assistance. This may be in part to the training school counselors receive to be able to interact with colleagues in a meaningful manner. Ray (2007) referenced teachers’ perceptions of the usefulness of consulting with school counselors as they identified “personal support with contact and listening from the consultant as the most helpful factor of consultation” (p. 430). Being drawn to school counselors for assistance may stem from any number of challenges being faced by the staff members (African American women educators in particular face unique challenges) as well as the perceived availability—both physical availability as well as emotional availability—of the school counselor. In-depth exploration of school counselor consultation and professional collaboration are presented in greater detail in Chapter Two.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as a theoretical framework to provide a platform for the presentation of the participant voices in this study. CRT is particularly useful in examining issues of race and education in that:

Critical race theory in education is a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25).

This description of CRT directly supports the purpose of the current study to bring to light the experiences of African American women educators. CRT, with its focus on closely examining issues of race, provides a stage from which the key factors, constructs, and variables contributing to the experiences of African American women educators can be explored. The intentional seeking of these previously under-explored stories provided a much needed insight to offer a counter-narrative to the predominant voice of majority culture. Additionally, this study presents previously unexplored narratives that will help to fill a void of information that depicts the unrepresented stories of African American women educators. Reports gathered from participants in this study confirmed that there are gaps in the literature on the unique perspectives of African American women educators.

To provide further theoretical context and understanding surrounding the use of CRT as a framework, the following essential theoretical components and key understandings are outlined:

1. *The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination.*

Though CRT focuses initially and largely on the construct of “race”, it also acknowledges the presence of and investigates the interactions with other forms of subordination (based on class, gender, and other means of marginalization) (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). For the purposes of this study, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of the interplay of race and gender. CRT provided the lens through which both were closely examined.

2. *The challenge to dominant ideology.* Critical race theory challenges readers to

question the historical and traditional systems in education that support the concepts of merit, equality, colorblindness, and opportunity for all (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT asserts that there exists in the field of education, structures and systems that act as a cover to further perpetuate the imbalance of power that currently exists. CRT challenges white privilege and challenges the widely accepted notions of objectivity or neutrality in research.

Essentially, CRT posits that the concept of objectivity does not exist and that upon closer inspection, there is an agenda that leaves dominant culture in a position to benefit.

3. *The commitment to social justice.* The social justice agenda leads to

“elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty” and “the empowerment of subordinated minority groups” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). The presentation of personal experiences by African American women educators allows for the examination of school practices that purport to support social

justice agendas as viewed by the diminished perspective of marginalized voices. Who better to report about social justice initiatives than those whose voices have been silenced?

4. *The centrality of experiential knowledge.* Critical race theory appreciates and embraces the importance of storytelling as an authentic, valid form of personal information sharing and casts it as an essential component of CRT in that the understanding of the experiences of people of color are key to counterbalancing the standard, so-called universal experiences which presents whites as the norm. In other words, what has been accepted as truth no longer represents the only viewpoint or perspective possible in information sharing. Rather, the experiences of people of color are not measured against the experiences of whites, but are truly recognized, accepted, and appreciated of their own accord and relevance (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).
5. *The transdisciplinary perspective.* CRT “insists on analyzing race and racism by placing them in both historical and contemporary contexts” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27). CRT infuses a multidisciplinary approach that allows for a multi-faceted, more comprehensive understanding that the effects of various forms of discrimination have on people of color. For the purposes of this study, knowledge and findings from different areas of study (such as law, sociology, political sciences, etc.) were included to provide enhanced understanding of contexts and events presented by participants.

In addition to these key concepts, consideration of Matsuda's (1991) original concept of critical race theory as it related to law was presented and then applied specifically to the field of education:

The work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination. (p. 133)

In expanding this definition to the area of education, I conceptualized CRT *as the work of scholars of color and allies who are attempting to develop a framework that accounts for the role of racism in public education and that work toward the elimination of racism as a part of the larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination.* In the context of the present study, this definition challenged all stakeholders to move away from the current practices that support the subordination and oppression of African American women educators by the suppression of their voices and devaluing of their stories.

Additionally, storytelling and the "oral tradition" has deep roots in African American communities (Mazama & Asante, 2005, p. 391). CRT is a framework for identifying and challenging dominant narratives in research (Chavez, 2012; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Storytelling is not recognized as a legitimate form of research in the perspective of mainstream science (Chaves, 2012). It is, however, because of the relevance of storytelling roots in the African American community that I have chosen CRT as a framework to present the experiences of African American women educators (AAWE). The rules for reporting the truths of

traditionally marginalized groups have been established by those in mainstream society who hold the power and as such are able to stifle the voices and silence the narratives of those on the margins of society. The result is that marginalized people remain marginalized, stereotyped, and stigmatized. Mainstream scholars and researchers are kept in power by discrediting research that incorporates theoretical views, such as CRT, that allows for open sharing and accurate accounts of oppressed, marginalized populations. Using CRT methodology allows for the storytelling of oppressed people and may eventually lead to deeper understanding by hearing their experiences. It is through this understanding of a CRT framework that the experiences of African American women educators can be conceptualized.

### **Delimitations and Assumptions**

As with any dissertation research project, there were certain delimitations that influenced this study. Boundaries related to time and location of the study, sample of the study, specific aspects of the problem, and selection criteria are presented here. The data collection time-frame spanned a five month period from June 2015 through October 2015. The location for this study was the suburbs of a large Midwestern city. Information was gathered from participants via semi-structured interviews. It is important to note that, since the primary focus was the experiences of African American educators who work in predominantly white public school districts, the present study included only input from African American women educators who work in school districts where the majority of students and faculty were white. In the area surrounding this city, there were school systems where the population was majority African American



students and staff. It was important to distinguish between these different schools as the experiences of African American women educators was likely to differ in these settings.

The researcher discloses her dual roles as principal investigator as well as a participant and contributor of perspectives as an African American woman school counselor. Additionally, the researcher assumed that participants, researcher included, in this study would respond openly, honestly, and accurately. The information gained from this study is important, timely, and relevant to the work of school counselors.

### **Definition of terms**

*Altered Realities:* This term is used in the study to refer to a heightened awareness experienced by African Americans that includes awareness of injustice, not belonging, being undervalued, and trying to make oneself fit or matter under those circumstances. Both the concept of double consciousness by W.E.B. DuBois and crooked room presented by Harris-Perry constitute examples of altered realities.

*Citizenship:* This term is used in the study to refer to membership. As stated by Harris-Perry, “citizenship is more than an individual exchange of freedoms for rights; it is also membership in a body politic, a nation, and a community” (Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. 36-37).

*Critical Race Theory:* Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework that seeks to challenge and transform aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

*CRT Methodology:* CRT Methodology is a research framework that recognizes that “racism is often well disguised in the rhetoric of shared ‘normative’ values and ‘neutral’ social scientific and educational principles and practices” (Solorzano & Yosso,

2002, p. 27). In regards to this study, CRT Methodology was employed as an intentional means of examining so-called universal truths and calling into question dominant assertions of what is valued and right.

*Fit:* Used within this study, the term “fit” refers to a balanced relationship between a person and their environment.

*Recognition:* This term refers to the concept of being visible to others as an authentic being. Conversely, *misrecognition* refers to one not being seen as her true self. Harris-Perry stressed the importance of this concept, noting that people “desire meaningful recognition of their humanity and uniqueness...” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 36).

### **Organization of the study**

This study is organized into five chapters, references, and appendices. Chapter One provides an introduction of the study which includes a statement of the problem, purpose of the study, a brief historical overview, relevance to school counselor, theoretical framework, limitations of the study, and key terms. Chapter Two presents a review of relevant literature pertaining to the understanding of key concepts related to the experiences of African American women educators. Chapter Three defines the research design and methodology of the study. The methods used for data collection, procedures to be followed, and selection of the sample population are described. Chapter Four presents the results of the study. Chapter Five provides discussion of implications, recommendations, and conclusions of the results as well as suggestions for future research. A reference list and appendices of supplemental documents conclude this work.

## Chapter Two

### Review of Literature

Black women have so much to offer our country, so many gifts to share with all of us. And yet, as a society and as a nation, we have never quite stopped to appreciate the truth of their experience, the verity of what it feels like to be Black and female, the reality that no matter how intelligent, competent, and dazzling she may be, a Black woman in our country today still cannot count on being understood and embraced by mainstream White America. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 2)

This chapter presents an extensive review of literature on topics related to the primary research question: *How do African American women educators experience being in a crooked room?* It is necessary to have an understanding of the historical and current issues concerning the experiences of African American women, therefore, numerous topics are explored.

This in-depth review of the literature, which pertains both directly and indirectly to the experiences of African American women educators, begins with a reflection on racial labels. In this work, I use the terms *African American* and *Black* or *Black American* interchangeably. I find it important to reflect on these terms because of the history and power in the terms. Mazama and Asante (2005) stated that the term African American “has been used to designate people of African descent who are domiciled in the United States since 1865” (p. 8). From a historical view, 1865 is identified as a turning point since, prior to that year, “[B]lack people were not Americans, and therefore, most saw themselves only as

Africans” (Mazama & Asante, 2005, p. 8). The evolution of labels used to describe African Americans as a group is rich and complex. Sigelman, Tuch, and Martin (2005) examined the history of terms used to refer to Americans of African descent - *colored*, *Negro*, *Black*, *Afro-American*, and *African American* – that were commissioned at different times in history and indicated changes in the political climate. Upon first arriving in the United States, African Americans were not afforded the right to determine their own racial identification label. Being mindful of the history (and even current practices) of using derogatory labels for African Americans as mechanisms of racism and oppression, I reflect here on the importance of recognizing the personal preference of members within the African American population in naming their racial identity. Sigelman et al. (2005) found that, in their survey of Americans of African descent, “preference for the label ‘black’ or ‘African American’ was nearly equally divided” (p. 436). This finding is interpreted within this study as justification for the interchangeable use of *Black* and *African American*.

This chapter begins with a recounting of national statistics that provide context for this study, followed by an overview of the socio-political and cultural history of African American women in the United States. Paying particular attention to the educational history of African American women in an education context provides a perspective that deepens the understanding of the impact that past events have on the current experiences of African American women educators working in public education. Concepts related to double consciousness and the crooked room impart a critical awareness of cognitive and psychological positioning specific to the experiences of African Americans. Critical race

theory is further explored, providing a framework dedicated to presenting counter-narratives of African American women. Next, professional collaboration and school climate are considered as the public school setting often has attached with it a specific set of mores and rules that are of key importance when reflecting upon the lived experience of persons operating with that context. Finally, a closing section is dedicated to considering the experiences of African American women educators in the context of their altered realities.

### **Context of the Problem**

To better understand the experiences of African American women in the United States, it is necessary to consider current circumstances of this population related to health, socioeconomic status, employment, and educational factors. This section presents the overall outlook for African American women in light of the aforementioned categories. It should be noted, however, that despite the categories being presented separately, there is relevance in the interplay and intersectionality of the categories (e.g., income is related to access to healthcare, which is then related to overall health, which has a relationship to work performance and attendance).

**Health considerations.** The Center for Disease Control (CDC), in its reports on the health status of various racial and ethnic populations in the United States, pointed out “striking and apparent” disparities between African Americans and other racial and ethnic populations (CDC, 2013, para. 1). Additionally, multiple studies have found that African American women are at increased risk for poor health in comparison with white women (Hogue, 2002; Schulz et al., 2000; Young et al., 2004). These discrepancies in health status are evident in the following facts related to high risk health conditions, life

expectancy, death rates, infant mortality, and other measures such as risk conditions and lifestyle behaviors.

The following statistics on African American health risks portray the seriousness of the health situation: a) African Americans in 2009 had the highest death rates from heart disease and stroke compared with other racial and ethnic populations; b) the prevalence of obesity among adults from 2007-2010 was largest among African American women compared with white and Mexican American women and men; c) in 2010, the prevalence of diabetes among African American adults was nearly twice as large as the prevalence among white adults. (Center for Disease Control, 2013, para. 3).

The Center for Disease Control (2014) identified and reported on several risk factors that contribute to quality of life and health and also impact the mortality of individuals. In looking at the data of African American women as a group between the years of 2009-2012, it was found that they have the highest percentage of occurrence for obesity (57.4%) and hypertension (44.5%) when compared to African American men (37.9% occurrence of obesity and 39.9% occurrence of hypertension), white women (35.9% occurrence of obesity and 33.7% occurrence of hypertension), and white men (26.3% occurrence of obesity and 33.1% occurrence of hypertension). These statistics exhibit disparities in health along racial and gender lines. In noting these discrepancies between African American women and white women, several studies have attempted to develop theory that examines and explains the causes or origins of health differences along racial lines. Hogue (2002) reported that there is a growing consensus among social and health scientists that these disparities between racial and ethnic minorities and majority populations “arise from psychosocial and cultural factors related to the social

definition of population groups, as opposed to genetic differences at the population level” (p. 222). The argument was that race alone does not account for the disparities seen between racial groups; therefore, cultural factors should be examined.

Hogue (2002) applied the epidemiologic theory of agent/host/environment (A/H/E) to explain the relationship between African American women, their environment, and their health. In the A/H/E model, the agent (A) refers to the direct cause of disease or ill health, the host (H) refers to the individual exposed to the risk of disease, and the environment (E) encompasses all factors outside of the host that make the individual more susceptible to succumbing to illness. Environmental factors include the host’s social, cultural, and physical surroundings (Hogue, 2002). When examining the impact of disparities in health experienced by African Americans, Hogue insisted that “understanding the agent and how it functions is crucial to disease control” (2002, p. 224). Hogue identified acts of racial discrimination as an agent or factor that directly relates to poor health and/or disease.

Two forms of racism, and their impact on individuals, were examined: personally mediated racism and institutional racism. *Personally mediated racism* includes individual insults and discriminatory acts described as racially charged personal attacks on the individual. They incite acute stress in the individual targeted and bring about physiological stress responses (“fight or flight”). *Institutional racism*, which is defined as “formal and informal policies and practices that deny equitable treatment to individuals because of their race or ethnic group affiliation” is addressed as well (Clark, 2001, p. 769). Social policies affect the health and disease susceptibility of individuals. Therefore, it is imperative to consider the historical and ongoing effects of institutional

racism as it relates to policies and practices that pertain individuals living in that particular society.

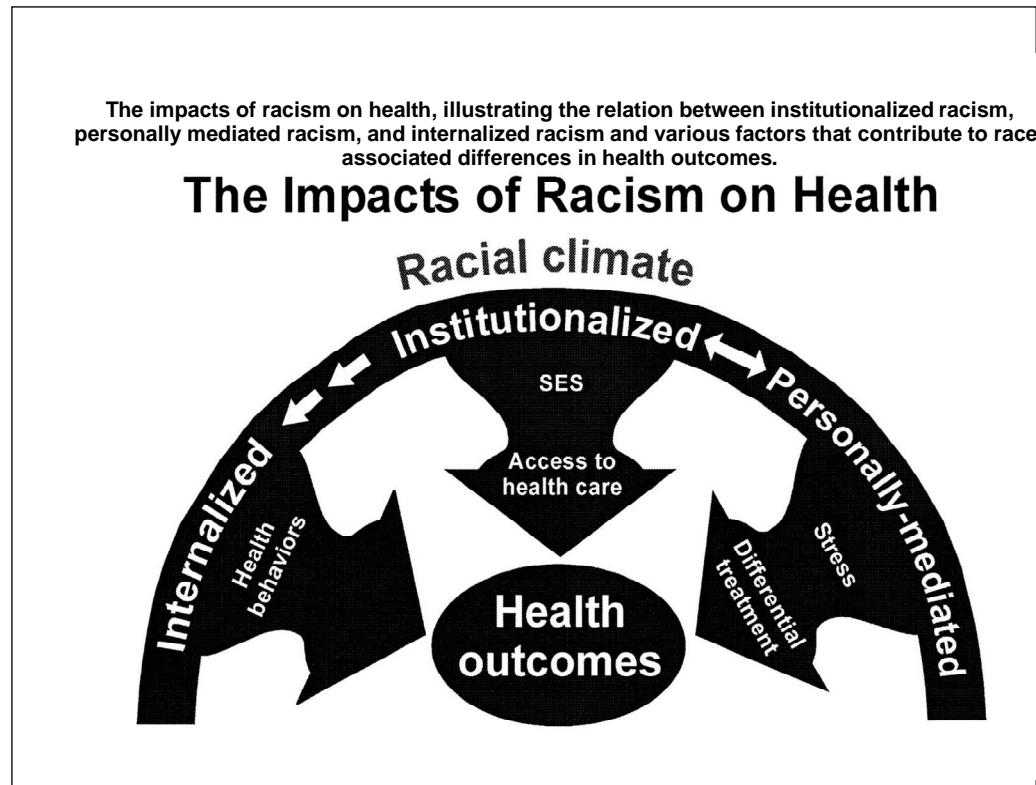
Hogue outlined two distinct ways in which institutional racism impacts the host or individual (see Figure 1). An initial effect is that “historic and ongoing racism” has an impact on the current SES of the individual which has the potential to dictate access to healthcare services (Hogue, 2002, p. 225). A second consideration on impact and the individual is through the direct effect of chronic environmental stressors (such as being subjected to negative stereotypes) associated with institutional racism.

Schulz, Israel, and Williams (2000) have also addressed racial health discrepancies. They hypothesized that stress associated with 1) living in segregated neighborhoods, 2) experiencing discrimination, and 3) experiencing acute life events, differentially and adversely affect African American women’s health status. In the same study, financial and family stress were associated with reported poor general health status for African American women.

In addition to considering the relationship between the agent and racism, it is equally important to examine the effects of racism on the host. Hogue (2002) reported that internalized racism (or the occurrence of members of marginalized groups to accept as truth, negative messages about themselves) leads to increased health risks such as obesity.

Figure 1. The Impacts of Racism on Health





(“The Impact of Racism on Health,” by C. P. Jones, 2001, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 154(4), p. 299. Copyright 2001 by Oxford University Press.)

In examining the general health outlook of African American women, disparities were apparent. The following subsection introduces two factors closely related to health: socioeconomic status and employment.

**Socioeconomic status and employment.** Current statistics on the discrepancy in pay between women and men is unsettling. Hegewisch, Deitch, and Murphy (2011) report that “on average, women working full-time earn only 77 cents for each dollar earned by men per year” (p. 70). The economic earnings situation is grimmer for African American women who earn only 62 cents to every dollar earned by white males (Hegewisch, Deitch, & Murphy, 2011). U.S. Census data from 2013 revealed that the median household income for African American families is lower than that of any other

racial or ethnic group. African Americans earned \$34,598, which falls well below the national median income of \$51, 939 (all races) and significantly below the median income of \$58, 270 for white, non-Hispanic households (De Navas-Walt & Proctor, 2014).

The inequalities of socioeconomic status between racial and gender groups becomes apparent when looking at trends in employment. African American women are more likely to be employed in lower paying service industries and have a lower rate of promotion to senior level jobs. Additionally, Sanchez-Hucles (1997) reported that “African American women are disproportionately represented in what are called secondary job markets comprising low-paying, menial, part-time jobs with few if any benefits” (p. 567). At all educational levels, African American women earn less than their white counterparts, suggesting that subtle remnants of historical discrimination coupled with current acute experiences of racism may hold African American women back from advancing as rapidly or as far as they might have if they were members of another racial group (Hogue, 2002, p. 223).

Recognizing that inequalities exist in the employment experiences for African Americans, more researchers have attempted to address issues of discrimination and racism in the workplace. Sanchez-Hucles (1997) reported on the experiences of African American women who have experienced “double jeopardy” in the workplace in terms of not only being discriminated against, but also pressured to feel that they are actually advantaged because of the race and gender. “Despite the fact that African American women have faced a legacy of discrimination, harassment, and low pay for more than a century in their long work history in the United States, a myth has developed that they

enjoy an "advantaged" or "bonus" status in the workforce by virtue of the interaction of their gender and race" (Sanchez-Hucles, 1997, p. 566). The author cited both racism and gender bias as motives for the perpetuation of the illusion of advantage for African American women, noting that members of majority groups which hold more status and power actually stand to benefit.

The myth of advantaged status for African American women functions to actually highlight the dual liabilities of Black women while allowing White women to capitalize on their privileged racial status and enables African American men to capitalize on their privileged gender status by disassociating themselves from African American women. (Sanchez-Hucles, 1997, p. 575)

Sanchez-Hucles (1997) asserted that this advantage is not realized by African American women, rather they are further harmed. The mythical notion of advantage subjects African American women to blame for their own lack of success.

The bonus status myth perpetuates the cycle of according economic, psychological, and physical health benefits to those with the most privilege in this society, while maintaining the convenient fiction that anyone—even an ethnic minority group of women—can be successful in the work force. (Sanchez-Hucles, 1997, p. 576)

Finally, Sanchez-Hucles (1997) notes that in order to make true progress toward addressing disparities in employment, the misperception that African American women possess an advantaged status must be confronted.

The intersectionality of race and gender presents an additional obstacle for African American women in employment. Hughes and Dodge (1997) reported that “in addition to occupational disadvantage based on gender, African American women encounter occupational disadvantages based on their race” (p. 583). The authors reported that African American women experience decreased job satisfaction and increased stress due to racial and gender bias they encountered in their workplaces. Hughes and Dodge (2007) also uncovered a tendency for African Americans employed in workplaces that had few other African Americans to experience greater incidences of institutional racism which in turn, had a substantial impact on job satisfaction (effectively lowering satisfaction). The authors concluded that efforts to increase opportunities for equitable employment for African American women must support workers and supervisors to become aware of and challenge their biases and discriminatory views and practices.

**Education.** In reviewing the economic situation of African American women as a group, it is necessary to consider not only income but also level of education, as this has a direct impact on earning potential. In a review of the educational attainment of African American, consider the following statistics: a) only 21.4% of African American women had a college degree or higher in 2010, compared to 30% of white women; b) African American women held 8.58% of bachelor’s degrees held by women in 2012 though they constituted 12.7% of the female population; c) only 2% of African American women are represented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM, fields, while women in total make up 24% of the STEM workforce (Guerra, 2013).

According to the most recent statistics available from the National Center for Education Statistics, women earn the majority of conferred post-secondary degrees across

all racial groups. This may be due to the fact that women often have to earn a higher degree of education to be competitively considered for the same position as a man, even though they are statistically likely to earn less than a man in that same job. This sentiment was noted by Williams (1985) in her findings related to Black women who pursued administrative positions in academia, “a minority woman, more than others, must have the doctorate” (p. 11). An in-depth account of the history of African Americans is presented subsequently, so as to provide additional context and understanding for current experiences of African American women.

### **The History of African Americans in Education Contexts**

*Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family. -Kofi Annan*

It is necessary to have an understanding of the relationship African American people have had with education to be able to conceptualize current experiences of African American educators. African Americans as a group are marginalized and fall behind their white peers in several indicator areas related to education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Education statistics reported by The Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2013) revealed that African American students score lower on math and reading assessments and have a lower high school completion rate than their white peers. Additionally, African American students are less likely to take advanced math and science courses in high school - which in turn has a direct impact on college readiness. In a recent report from the Forum on Child and Family Statistics, education was identified as a key indicator in determining wellbeing. Considering the influence of education on

wellbeing, it is critical to understand the history of education for African Americans in the United States.

Education was not always accessible for African Americans. Since the first time enslaved Africans of record arrived in the American in 1619, systems of power have been initiated to ensure that white people maintain control (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Several pertinent examples of these sanctions to create power differentials are examined in the following text. It is documented that during slavery, the education of Blacks was illegal and punishable by death (for enslaved Africans) and punishable by fines for white teachers. The following act was passed in North Carolina in 1831, allowing harsh punishments for both black and white people who attempted to educate slaves:

Whereas the teaching of slaves to read and write, has a tendency to excite dis-satisfaction in their minds, and to produce insurrection and rebellion, to the manifest injury of the citizens of this State:

*Therefore,*

*Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina, and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same,* That any free person, who shall hereafter teach, or attempt to teach, any slave within the State to read or write, the use of figures excepted, or shall give or sell to such slave or slaves any books or pamphlets, shall be liable to indictment in any court of record in this State having jurisdiction thereof, and upon conviction, shall, at the discretion of the court, if a white man or woman, be fined not less than one hundred dollars, nor more than two hundred dollars, or imprisoned; and if a free person of color, shall be fined, imprisoned, or

whipped, at the discretion of the court, not exceeding thirty nine lashes, nor less than twenty lashes.

II. *Be it further enacted*, That if any slave shall hereafter teach, or attempt to teach, any other slave to read or write, the use of figures excepted, he or she may be carried before any justice of the peace, and on conviction thereof, shall be sentenced to receive thirty nine lashes on his or her bare back. (Legislative Papers, 1830–31 Session of the General Assembly)

Similarly, in 1847, Missouri's General Assembly passed an act stating that "no person shall keep or teach any school for the instruction of negroes or mulattos, in reading or writing, in this State" (Missouri State Archives, 2014). As noted in the particular wording used to reference "dis-satisfaction" and "rebellion," educated slaves represented a danger to upsetting the slave system. Keeping enslaved Africans uneducated increased the likelihood that they would remain dependent upon their slave masters. Laws such as these provide historical examples of the commitment of whites in power to purposefully and deliberately construct a system in which enslaved Africans were systematically and effectively oppressed and stripped of hope for a liberated future.

In addition to specific state legislation, the Black Codes, which were enacted between 1865 through 1866, spanned the entire Southern region of the United States. This passage provides a clear example of a legal system that was meant to oppress African Americans.

The Black Codes were patterned after the antebellum Slave Codes, and their express purpose was to restrict African American freedom. Indeed, the codes were created in response to the fact that more than 4 million

formerly enslaved Africans had recently gained their freedom, and they served to keep these African people from full participation in the political, economic, and social life of the South. In fact, the Black Codes sought to define the legal place of African people as permanently inferior to whites, and thus reaffirmed the white Southerners' attitude that black people were meant to serve the interests of the white population. (Mazama & Kolefi, 2005, p. 120)

The Black Codes, endorsed by President Andrew Jackson, prohibited African Americans from sitting on juries, voting, carrying firearms, and even limited Blacks from providing full testimony against whites. The long standing effects of the Black Codes can still be felt presently. One specific example has socioeconomic roots as people of African descent were restricted to holding certain occupations while other occupations were off-limits. Career positions that have been historically racially segregated are often harder for African Americans to enter into today. This is often justified by comments that imply a certain level of readiness must be met before an African American can hold a certain position.

Deliberate efforts to keep slaves disempowered by revoking their access to education is evident throughout United States history. The state of Texas instituted its own version of the Black Codes which enforced many of the same restrictions for Black Americans as the national Black Codes and also imposed legislation that addressed educational access and "prevented blacks from sharing in the public school fund" (Mazama & Asante, 2005, p. 120).



The initial groundwork that was laid to keep African Americans uneducated has had long lasting effectiveness. The relationship between political events and education is evident throughout various events in history. Slave revolts, the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 which abolished slavery in confederate States that wanted to separate from the Union, and the 1870 ruling that allowed African American men the right to vote. All of these legal measures have had an impact on educational practices and outcomes of African Americans in the United States. The racially unjust history of the United States with its legacy of segregated schools, Jim Crow laws, and devaluation of African Americans has set the stage for an imbalance of power that still has an effect on how African Americans experience and access education at present.

To understand the depth and pervasiveness of racism that is part of United States history, one only has to examine the legal mandates passed by the U.S. government. It is within this system and under other laws that supported institutional racism that formal rules were arranged which prevented the equal access to education for African Americans. Mazama and Asante (2005) described Jim Crow laws as “a set of ideas, social norms, life ways, mythofoms, role-play symbols, sanctions, and devastations created after the Civil War by white politicians intent on maintaining a system of oppressive control over African American life and economics” (p. 282). These laws were an intentional, insidious effort by white policy makers to devise a power structure within which African Americans would have little or no power or hope. “Jim Crow laws aimed their invasive enterprise at the level of social reality and psychological manifestation in order to reestablish a stratified social hierarchy based on white subjugation of African American people” (Mazama & Asante, 2005, p. 282). The reference to “social reality”

and “psychological manifestation” address the comprehensive nature in which Jim Crow operated. The laws had far reaching social consequences - felt in lack of employment and housing opportunities, for example. Psychologically, Jim Crow laws effectively harmed African Americans through misrecognition and rendered African American people unable to accurately see themselves; instead African Americans were stripped of self-worth and even turned to hatred toward their own community. Public lynching was among the repertoire of psychological attacks employed and sanctioned under Jim Crow laws.

In examining important historical events that have affected African American’s access to education, *Brown v. Board* holds key significance. The ruling of *Brown v. Board of Topeka* (1954) determined that racially segregated schools were not equal, nor constitutional, and mandated that schools must be integrated. Although this was an important ruling in the journey for equal education rights for African American students, it resulted in some damaging consequences. Bell (2004) reflected on the misgivings of the Brown ruling:

Its advocates expected that the Brown decision would cut through the dark years of segregation with laserlike intensity. The resistance, though, was open and determined. At best, the Brown precedent did no more than cast a half-light on that resistance, enough to encourage its supporters but not bright enough to reveal just how long and difficult the road to equal educational opportunity would prove to be. Contending with that resistance made it unlikely that any of those trying to implement Brown,

including myself, would stop to consider that we might be on the wrong road. (Bell, 2004, p. 19)

Bell argued in this passage that *Brown* must be viewed critically, as the ruling was not a complete solution to unequal education for African American students. Heaney and Uchitelle (2004) addressed often over-looked evidence about the state of African American education prior to the *Brown v Board* ruling. “[N]ot all black [students] had a bad experience attending, or teaching in, the segregated schools pre-*Brown* years” (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004, p. 11). The overwhelming common understanding is that *Brown v. Board* was a saving grace to the educational disparities experienced by African American students. This was not the case, however. African American students undoubtedly did experience segregated schools as inferior; however, the call to desegregate schools did not provide a complete solution to the negatives that students and schools experienced. Supply shortages, teacher reassignments, and overcrowded schools continued to be a problem in school communities.

In considering the totality of the above mentioned legal mandates and social constructions of race that led to justification for the oppression of African Americans in the United States, an understanding of performance discrepancies between African Americans and whites becomes apparent. In a system that has not only undervalued African Americans but has purposefully limited their access to education through enacting oppressive laws, African American students of today are struggling to advance within the field of education (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Loder-Jackson, 2012). The proverbial playing field is not nearly level and additionally, the road to even accessing this playing field has been an uphill battle for marginalized African Americans.

Despite the oppressive power systems that existed to limit African American's access to equal rights, there were individuals and movements that attempted to counteract these racial injustices. The Black Consciousness Movement, started by Steve Biko, which originated in South Africa in the late 1960s through early 1970s, exposed and confronted systems of racism that kept Blacks oppressed and marginalized. Mazama and Asante (2005) defined black consciousness as "the realization by Africans of the need to rally together around the cause of liberation from oppression and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bound them to perpetual servitude" (2005, p.122). Though this movement commenced in apartheid South Africa, Biko's work was very influential in the U.S. Black Power Movement of the 1960s. The Black Power Movement served as a collective body designed to confront racist practices that systematically devalued and oppressed Black people.

Although the history of education for African Americans is tainted with racism and seemingly never-ending battles for equal access, there are several notable accounts of African American women educators who played key roles in progressing the educational history of African Americans. The stories of inequality as it relates to African Americans are numerous and necessary to consider as a part of national history; however, bringing light to the stories of two early African American women educators and their efforts provides a counter narrative that is critical to understanding the whole picture of African American educational history. Anna Julia Cooper and Septima Clark were pioneers in the fight for recognition and equal rights for African American women. Theirs are stories of African American women educators who have dedicated their lives to advancing the movement to allow equal educational access for African Americans.

*Only the Black Woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.*

(Cooper, 1988, p.31)

**Anna Julia Cooper.** Anna Julia Cooper, a Black feminist foremother, embodies the spirit of African American women speaking out for rights and recognition. Born August 10, 1858 into slavery, Cooper's history and development provide an early account of the struggles of African American women spanning a time of legal enslavement and oppression in America. Cooper was the fourth Black woman in the United States to earn the Doctorate of Philosophy degree. To accomplish this, Cooper had to study at the University of Paris. Even at this international institution, Cooper was made ever aware of her devalued status as an African American woman. Despite the hardships and setbacks she faced in pursuing her education, Cooper was outspoken about the need for African American women to continue to work towards becoming educated.

Cooper spoke passionately about the need for African American girls to be encouraged to pursue better opportunities by means of seeking equity through education. Fully aware that the state of the nation at that time did not, however, recognize the value of nor afford rights to African American girls, Cooper spoke to the dubious future of these girls.

...add my plea for the Colored Girls of the South - that large, bright, promising fatally beautiful class that stand shivering like a delicate plantlet before the fury of tempestuous elements, so full of promise and possibilities, yet so sure of destruction. (Cooper, 1988, pp. 24-25)

In this passage, Cooper speaks to the potential she sees in young African American girls, but holds little hope for them to stand up against the “tempestuous elements” of racism and oppression rampant in society.

A primary message of Cooper’s was for the uplifting of the African American race through education. Specifically, Cooper saw the need for increased support for the education of African American girls:

“I am my Sister’s keeper!” should be the hearty response of every man and woman of the race, and this conviction should purify and exalt the narrow, selfish and petty personal aims of life into a noble and sacred purpose. We need men who can let their interest and gallantry extend outside the circle of their aesthetic appreciation; men who can be a father, a brother, a friend to every weak, struggling unshielded girl. We need women who are so sure of their own social footing that they need not fear leaning to lend a hand to a fallen or falling sister. (Cooper, 1988, p. 32)

Arguably, it is because of these unique occurrences that take place at the intersection of race and gender that Cooper called for the added care for and support of African American girls.

Let us insist then on special encouragement for the education of our women and special care in their training. Let our girls feel that we expect something more of them than that they merely look pretty and appear well in society. Teach them that there is a race with special needs which they and only they can help; that the world needs and is already asking for their trained, efficient forces. Finally, if there is an ambitious girl with pluck

and brain to take on the higher education, encourage her to make the most of it. Let there be the same flourish of trumpets and clapping of hands as when a boy announces his determination to enter the lists. (Cooper, 1988, p. 78-79)

Cooper is recognized as one of the first voices to speak about the intersecting oppressions of gender and race.

The colored woman of today occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. (Cooper, 1988, p. 134)

Cooper was one of the first educators and civil rights activists to speak to the intersectionality of race and gender, asserting that it is not possible to fully capture the dilemma of being an African American woman at that time without understanding diminished status in both gender and race. It is critical to note the importance that race and gender have continually played for African American women throughout the history of the United States and the continuation of this relevance at present. Anna Julia Cooper reflected on the unique intersections of status experienced by African American women at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it maintains relevance for African American women today.

**Septima Clark.** Septima Poinsetta Clark was born on May 3, 1898 in Charleston, South Carolina. Clark's father had been born into slavery - a reminder that freedom was

a relatively new concept for African Americans during that time period. Clark's future as an educator and political activist was largely influenced by the political climate in Charleston during her formative years. The Jim Crow South allowed "public power arrangements" to set up a power structure within the United States that "granted white men ultimate authority, limited black men and black women's opportunities, and rendered little black girls invisible" (Charron, 2009, p. 14). Clark grew up in a world that did not recognize her rights as a citizen.

Despite these legal systems of power that favored white people, there were African Americans who had acquired the right to vote and, beginning in 1867, they elected African American congressmen, state legislators, and other government officials (Charron, 2009). It was under the influence of this changing political climate, that Septima Clark grew up and began to develop her interest in politics.

*"Education was never a politically neutral issue in the Jim Crow South"* (Charron, 2009, p. 3).

Clark realized the value in achieving an education as a means to gaining access and rights within society. Clark's reflections on her own early education experiences being taught by white teachers paint a picture of her motivation to become a teacher who supported African American students. Seeing that their children were not learning much and were not being treated with dignity by their white teachers, Clark's parents paid to send her and her siblings to a private school operated by black teachers. At a time when Charleston laws prevented African American teachers from being hired to teach at black schools and white teachers supported ideas of black people being inferior, Clark's parents



sought out black teachers who would provide a stronger educational foundation for their children by demonstrating respect, rather than contempt.

Septima Clark continued her education beyond high school and attended Avery, a teacher's training institute. Upon graduating from Avery, Clark took her first teaching assignment in 1916 at a rural teaching post - John's Island school. Teaching jobs in rural areas were not in high demand for white teachers, nor were they well supervised by educational boards. Therefore, Clark and her African American colleagues were allowed some degree of autonomy which proved to be a double edged sword. Although the teachers were allowed to teach as they saw fit and because the district administrators were so far removed, the African American teachers and their students often had to go without necessary school supplies as they were not provided by the school board (Charron, 2009).

The less than ideal conditions Clark experienced stirred within her a sense of seeking justice which fueled Clark's desire to become an activist. Clark became involved with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1919 and engaged in a campaign that sought to force Charleston to hire black teachers to work in segregated schools (Charron, 2009). Success in that campaign propelled Clark to take up the charge with other agencies as well. One of Clark's most notable contributions was her work with the Citizenship Schools - programs that taught adults to read and write and ultimately helped African Americans succeed in obtaining the right to vote. Clark also became involved with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which helped make advancements in the Civil Rights Movement. Septima Clark has stood out as an African

American woman educator who embodied the spirit of education as a vehicle for social action.

### **Stereotypes of African American Women**

African American women living in the United States today have to battle against the constant onslaught of oppression enacted by both racial and gender stereotypes.

These stereotypes are deeply embedded in the history of the United States and still have harmful consequences for African American women in present contexts. hooks (1981) highlighted intentional use of stereotypes designed to perpetuate negative images of Black people and to keep people divided along racial lines. Collins (2009) spoke to the relationship between stereotypes of Black women and power: “These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2009, p. 77).

Additionally, Collins illustrated the progression of the omission of black women from positions of power that in turn elevates the power and status of white male ideas, which in turn creates further suppression of black women’s voices and ultimately creates a void wherein stereotypical portrayals of black women pervade popular culture and public policies.

Exploring the concepts of microaggressions and implicit bias helps illustrate the insidious nature of racial stereotypes. Sue et al. (2007) referred to racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Sue et al., present three types of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and

microinvalidations. A microassault is defined as an “explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). People who engage in microassaults are “likely to hold notions of minority inferiority privately and will only display them when they lose control or feel relatively safe” (Sue et al, 2007, p. 274). Microinsults are characterized by “rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity” and “represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color” (Sue et al. 2007, p. 274). Examples of this include statements such as “How did you get your job?” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job, regardless of race.” Microinvalidations are described as “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. Sue et al. point to statements such as African Americans being told “I don’t see color” or “We are all human beings.” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Sue et al. (2007) asserted that racial microaggressions have a powerful impact on both the target of the microaggressions as well as the perpetrators leading to psychological harm to African Americans, limited understanding of racial realities for whites, and impeded racial relations for both.

Implicit bias or unintentional bias refers to types or expressions of bias that are hard to control and measure and are not always in conscious awareness (Boysen, 2010). Examples of this include decreased smiling and eye contact, moving farther away from targeted individuals, and generally being less friendly toward members of a target group. Boysen suggested that implicit bias is a “possible explanation for the dissociation

between intentional and unintentional discrimination manifested in aversive racism and microaggressions” (Boysen, 2010, p. 211). Additionally, Boysen pointed to the need for understanding and dealing with implicit bias in order to fully address and ultimately dismantle racism.

In order to truly understand the pressures and limitations being projected onto African American women, stereotypes must be made transparent and fully considered within the current discourse and understanding of microaggressions, implicit bias and the progression of racism. This section presents descriptions and the history of stereotypes that have led to the distorted views of African American women. Though there are three negative stereotypes dominate the history of Black women in America: the mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. Additional stereotyped characterizations of African American women - Superwoman, chattel, and the Welfare Queen - are presented as well. These specific stereotypes and their contemporary considerations are presented below.

**Mammy.** The image of the mammy is prominent in the history of the United States and is quite possibly the most well-known stereotype of African American women (DuBois, 1995; Mullings, 1997). Represented in film, photos, postcards, and even collectible figurines, the mammy is depicted as “the faithful, obedient domestic servant” (Collins, 2009, p. 80). The stereotype of the mammy is meant to oppress Black women psychologically and emotionally by setting up a power differential in which black women are subservient to white families and further oppresses black women by pushing the idea that the mammy is accepting and content in her role as subordinate to whites. Relatedly, Du Bois points out the “perversion of motherhood” experienced by the black mammy as caretaker for White families, while she must deny the needs of her own children (DuBois,

1995, p. 294). Though the mammy stereotype is often seen as jolly and portrayed as loving of the White families she serves, nurturing, and a devoted caretaker, the mammy stereotype serves to control and oppress black women through multiple means.

The mammy stereotype has a role in perpetuating economic oppression as well in that the domestic worker, though proclaimed to be loved by her white family, is continuously economically exploited by receiving low wages. The mammy stereotype further oppresses the black family through the portrayal of mammy preferring to care for the white children of the family she works for as she forsakes her own children. In examining the physical characteristics of the stereotypical mammy, the following attributes are seen: dark skin, wide smile, broad, stout body, hair wrapped. This asexual depiction of the mammy serves to oppress gender and sexuality expression as well. The message sent is that the mammy needs not have her own gender or sexuality, financial freedom, or even her own family since her role as caretaker for the white family provides all the satisfaction, love, and meaning that she can possibly need (Collins, 2009, pp. 80-81).

In relating the historical view of the mammy to a contemporary workplace setting, Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) noted that “Black women who are viewed as Mammy are oftentimes placed in support-type positions in organizations with very little vertical mobility” (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008, p. 139). Furthermore, “although nurturing and caretaking abilities are positive qualities, they are not viewed as characteristics of influential leaders, thus hindering Black women’s career development” (p. 139). In essence, though it is considered a positive quality to be caring and compassionate,

especially in the field of education, these qualities may impeded the ability of Black women to seek career advancement opportunities.

**Jezebel.** The Jezebel stereotype invokes the image of a sexually immoral, loose Black woman (Collins, 2009; Mullings, 1997). The history of the Jezebel stereotype dates back to slavery and was used as a means to control the sexuality of black slave women. This term was first applied to describe sexually aggressive women and soon became a way to blame slave women for being sexually assaulted by white men. The rationale that these enslaved women possessed “excessive sexual appetites” paved the way for exploitation of black slave women through sexual assaults as well as increased demands for breeding more slave children (Collins, 2009, p.89).

The Jezebel stereotype has evolved into modern depictions of African American women as sexual deviants or objects to be exploited. In contemporary terms, African American women are subjected to the stereotype of the “hoochie” whose sole purpose it would seem is to provide sexual gratification for men. Collins (2009) chronicled different types of “hoochies” and asserted that, at its foundation, the purpose of this particular stereotype is to control the sexuality of Black women. This over-sexualization of Black women translated to a contemporary workplace setting allows perceptions that Black women are “unqualified workers” who have “used their sexuality to move upward on the corporate ladder, they are not seen as real leaders” (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008, p. 140).

**Sapphire.** Also known as The Angry Black Woman or Matriarch, the purpose of this stereotype is to discredit and pathologize Black women who express the normal human emotion of anger (Harris-Perry, 2011). Black women are seen as excessively

angry, emasculating, unhinged, having attitude problems, or being unreasonable when they speak up and express their viewpoints that defy dominant mainstream ideas. Henry (2000) addressed the notion that African American women “do not regard the workplace as an environment where they can express themselves and be themselves” (p. 523). Since Black women cannot express their often justified anger without criticism or being reduced to only being seen as an irate, angry Black woman, they often mask their anger - even if anger appropriately fits the situation. Black women in this sense, are being controlled by the image of being seen as irrational beings that should be feared.

Collins (2000) wrote about the angry Black woman and explored the origin of this stereotype. As with other stereotypes, the myth of the angry Black woman became a trope for how African American women are viewed. The origin of this particular stereotype is seated in viewing African American women as the cause for the demise of the African American family. Collins referred to the “matriarch” figure and noted her long list of character flaws which led to the Moynihan report (1965) findings citing Black women as the root cause for the demise of the Black family structure. The matriarch is found to be at fault because she is unable to “model appropriate gender behavior,” she spends too much time away from home – working outside the home, she emasculates the Black male (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 83). Overly aggressive and unfeminine, she is faulted both at home and in the workplace. Given this negative stereotype of the angry Black woman, it is not difficult to understand why African American women work so hard to mask their emotions. This juxtaposition of a “loud, strong, aggressive, rude, and at times lazy Sapphire” is especially evident in predominantly white workplaces where the

prevailing ideal is white women who are viewed as being “passive, quiet, and reserved” (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008, p. 138).

Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) offered a current representation of the Angry Black woman in their description of the “Crazy Black Bitch” or CBB. This emerging adaptation of the Angry Black woman shares similar traits to the Angry Black woman. “CBB refers to an angry, vindictive, unstable, Black woman, who at times appears overly aggressive and is not trusted by others... lazy, unprofessional, and extremely argumentative... she is virtually impossible to manage and work with, especially in a team environment” (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008, p. 138).

**Superwoman.** The superwoman stereotype may not appear to be as detrimental or negative as other stereotypes due in part to the notion of overachievement that is often associated with this trope. Nonetheless, this stereotype is equally oppressive. Harris-Perry (2011) uncovered the birth of the superwoman as evolving from the myth of the angry black woman: “The strong black woman looks like a way to channel the angry Sapphire in a socially acceptable direction” (p. 187). In essence, Black women who embody this stereotype are doing so out of the need to combat the images of Sapphire and desire to be seen as the complete opposite of the CBB. Also related to the concept of double jeopardy, that states that Black women often have to work twice as hard as their white female or black male colleagues, the superwoman is under unjust pressure to perform. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) surmised the following:

She is a twisted take on the myth that Black women are invulnerable and indefatigable, that they always persevere and endure against great odds without being negatively affected. This myth is one that many Black



women themselves embrace, and so they take on multiple roles and myriad tasks, ignoring the physical and emotional strain, fulfilling the stereotype (p. 3).

Similarly, Woods-Giscombé (2010) recognized that the superwoman stereotype can hold both positive and negative qualities - positive in the sense that it has provided an alternative view to the negative views that Black people are lazy and unmotivated, yet negative in the sense that this “legacy of strength in the face of stress” carries with it unintended negative health consequences (Woods- Giscombé, 2010, p. 669). Specifically in responding to repeated stress, African American women face increased health risks of obesity, hypertension, and heart disease (Center for Disease Control, 2014).

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) gave voice to paradox and “fictions” associated with Black women. “[I]f a Black woman is strong, she cannot be beautiful and she cannot be feminine. If she takes a menial job to put food on the table and send her children to school, she must not be intelligent. If she is able to keep her family together and see her children to success, she must be tough and unafraid. If she is able to hold her head high in spite of being sexually harassed or accosted, she must be oversexed or promiscuous (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, pp. 2-3). This exemplifies the idea that Black women are often forced into a no-win situation wherein we are not in control of how we are seen, despite our efforts to overcome challenging situations. Harris-Perry (2011) echoed the same sentiment: “when black women expect themselves to be capable of superhuman tasks, normal humanity is considered failure and that failure can be used to rationalize continuing inequality” (p.189).

**Chattel.** Scholar Josephine Carson, in her book *Silent Voices*, introduced the demeaning concept of African American women being viewed as subhuman.

“Chattel...meaning to live and die as mere bone and muscle, meaning to survive as a good body, a breeder, a worker. Chattel is *something*, not *someone*” (Carson, 1969, p. 2).

It is clear from this passage, the view of African American women during slavery was that of being property or a *thing* to be exploited for monetary gain. Viewing this concept in contemporary workplace settings, levels of exploitation are still present, though not in the same regard. Though slavery in this form is in the past and it is hoped that this perspective of how African American women should be viewed is obsolete, the fact remains that that violent view of African American women did in fact exist as an accepted view of African American women. Therefore, it becomes one of the misconceptions about themselves that African American women have to fight against presently.

**Welfare queen.**

*Momma Welfare Roll*

*Her arms semaphore fat triangles,  
Pudgy hands bunched on layered hips  
Where bones idle under years of fatback  
And lima beans.*

*Her jowls shiver in accusation  
Of crimes clichéd by  
Repetition. Her children, strangers  
To childhood's toys, play  
Best the games of darkened doorways,  
Rooftop tag, and know the slick feel of  
Other people's property.*

*Too fat to whore,  
Too mad to work,  
Searches her dreams for the  
Lucky sign and walks bare-handed  
Into a den of bureaucrats for*

*Her portion.  
“They don’t give me welfare.  
I take it.”  
(Angelou, 1994)*

The welfare queen stereotype demonstrates another oppressive socially constructed image of Black women (Lubiano, 1992). Collins (2009) gave this biting description of the welfare queen: “a highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman. Relying on the public dole, Black welfare queens are content to take the hard-earned money of tax-paying Americans and remain married to the state” (Collins, 2009, p. 89). This stereotype is a relatively new image in American as Black Americans have not always had the right to receive supports from the government. Collins (2009) states, “As long as poor Black women were denied social welfare benefits, there was no need for this stereotype. But when U.S. Black women gained more political power and demanded equity in access to state services, the need arose for this controlling image” (Collins, 2009, p. 86). African Americans have not been allowed the same access to economic assistance that was regularly offered to other American citizens, yet the stereotype of Black women breeding children merely to access additional money from the government has become the prevailing image of how Black Americans access government funding. This image of the welfare queen presents Black women as the cause for their own poverty: they are stereotyped as lazy, content to live off government benefits, and lacking motivation to make a better life for themselves.

It is imperative to consider the images of the welfare queen as this image is often compared to affirmative action. Parallels are drawn between the welfare queen receiving “handouts” and the idea that affirmative action takes jobs away from more deserving whites and hands them to less deserving Black women in particular. Sanchez-Hucles

(1997) argued against this fictional “bonus status” citing it as a “misperception [that] serves to maintain white male privilege” (p. 567).

### **Altered Realities**

African American women have had constraints such as racism, sexism, and poverty placed on them that have impacted their experiences in largely negative ways. As a direct result of societal forces portraying African American women in a negative light, the psyches and cognitions of African Americans have been adversely affected (Harris-Perry, 2011). Scholars have used different terminology to refer to inequalities experienced by an oppressed group such as those experienced by African American women. The term “second class citizen” has been applied to women in the United States for some time and the term is grounded in the fact that women have consistently been “denied rights of citizenship and protection of the law” (Dill, 1982, p. 1). Second class citizen may be more appropriate in describing the situation of white women, who have only one area - that of gender - in which they can be considered “less than.” In addressing this, Carter (1988) referred to black women as “third class citizens” noting that the experiences of African American women are often complex as they cannot be aligned solely with the plight of white women or African American men. To this end, it is necessary to consider a more comprehensive concept that explains the experiences of African American women.

Beale (1970) presented the concept of “double jeopardy” as the view that Black women are particularly prone to exploitation because they are viewed to have low status in both race and gender. Additional works have considered the impact of double jeopardy in the field of sociology, higher education, the labor market, and even military

ranking (Carter, 1988; Browne and Misra, 2003, Buchanan, Settles, & Woods, 2008; Graves, 1990); however, there is a dearth of information considering the specific experiences of African American women in the public education system. While I acknowledge research from other disciplines may influenced and informed this current body of research, it is imperative to consider the specific experiences of African American women educators within the public school structure for the purpose of this study. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) addressed the harmful impact of stereotypes:

Black women in America expend substantial psychic energy on managing the threats of racial and gender bias. ...Black women in American today find they must spend significant time, thought, and emotional energy watching every step they take, managing an array of feelings, and altering their behavior in order to cope with it all. (p. 60)

Jones and Shorter-Gooden, in describing the effort of African American women often exert to balance between true self-expression and expectations imposed upon them, relate to the idea of *stereotype threat*. Steele and Aronson (1995) defined stereotype threat as “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group” (p. 797).

Steele and Aronson (1995) further explained the “predicament” of stereotype threat stating that “the existence of such a stereotype means that anything one does or any of one's features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one's own eyes” (p. 797). When a widely known negative stereotype exists about a group, members of that group may develop a hyper-awareness of their own attributes and how their attributes may align

with stereotypes. Steele and Aronson asserted that the implications of stereotype threat on an individual may include disruptive effects such as anxiety, internalized inferiority anxiety, and the threat of being judged and treated stereotypically.

It is through the lens of considering the perspectives of African Americans, I introduce the concept of “altered reality”. This term is used within this study to refer to a heightened awareness experienced by African Americans that includes awareness of injustice, not belonging, being undervalued, and trying to make oneself fit or matter under those circumstances. Three specific altered realities are explored: double consciousness, the crooked room, and “shifting”.

### **Double Consciousness.**

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1903, p. 9)

Du Bois (1903) constructed the term “double consciousness” to capture the concept that African Americans have a dichotomous identity and must navigate society under a white gaze that may be interpret their humanity and actions negatively.

Recognizing the utility in maintaining conversations of double consciousness in the educational setting today, Kelly (2012) articulated this need: “when ‘consciousness’ is brought back to the center...the idea of a double consciousness (two souls, two thoughts,

two unreconciled strivings, and two warring ideals) becomes relevant to all people with marginal identities in a white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian world” (p. 130). Kelly’s work revolved around developing an understanding of double consciousness as it related to historical and contemporary issues in education. Kelly stated that Du Bois viewed double consciousness as a necessary component for African Americans to achieve “racial uplift, respectability, and mutual progress in an oppressive society” (Kelly, 2012, p. 133).

Kelly (2012) then reflected on Du Bois’ interpretation of the “veil” as a metaphor for an obstacle for racial justice:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world- a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. (Du Bois, 1903, p. 5)

Kelly (2012) explained the veil as “a social force impeding Black freedom, achievement, and progress. The veil stands as a metaphor for racial prejudice and discrimination at every level of society (individual, cultural, and institutional)” (Kelly, 2012, p. 133). Du Bois (1903) viewed education as a means for individuals to develop their gift of “second sight”, recognize their own, authentic self consciousness, and to challenge racial prejudice and discrimination.

Through exploring the process of helping African American students discover their self consciousness, Kelly (2012) researched the oral narratives of black school teachers from the “Age of Segregation” and reflected on their experiences of promoting double consciousness or “two thoughts” in their

classrooms (Kelly, 2012, p. 136). Input from teacher interviews revealed that black teachers used double consciousness to “challenge white supremacy and white racism directly in their schools- carefully and responsibly” (Kelly, 2012, p. 137). Teachers in this time of segregation understood the need to uplift their African American students while at the same time treading carefully so as to not place their own safety or employment in jeopardy.

From the interviews of the Black school teachers who participated in the study, Kelly (2012) found three prominent themes that were identified as “fundamental aspects of their pedagogical repertoire” that helped develop self consciousness in students; *Sympathy, Knowledge, and the Truth*. Sympathy is meant here as an intense caring for students and knowing and responding to student needs. In reflecting on the knowledge bestowed upon students, Kelly noted that teachers “believed that the education students acquired needed to be grounded in ‘racial knowledge’ ...They prepared students with skills and knowledge, combined with good moral development, a positive racial identity, and a solid basic education to enter a world of state-sponsored segregation, racial discrimination, and economic deprivation” (Kelly, 2012, p. 139). The *twoness* is portrayed clearly here in recognizing the disparity between the experiences many African American students feel in their segregated lives. Kelly captured the importance for including *truth* in education, noting that the African American teachers often shared with their students lessons about the existences of racial differences in the United States. Teachers reflected on different political systems for African Americans and white people and different opportunities for



employment for example. “In each of these accounts, participants promoted double consciousness in response to societal beliefs of Black inferiority” (Kelly, 2012, p. 141).

Kelly (2012) asserted that double consciousness can lead to a positive and true self-consciousness for marginalized students as educators work to connect their personal troubles to social inequalities” (p. 142). Kelly maintained that there is benefit for marginalized students in developing a double consciousness, an awareness of the truth of how oppression operates in United States society.

**The Crooked Room.** The idea of the crooked room refers to stereotypes (commonly used and accepted in popular media and United States society) of distorted gender and racial expectations placed on Black women and the subsequent oppression that occurs as a result of those stereotypes. Scholar Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) conceptualized the crooked room by explaining first the phenomenological study involving field dependence, or the study of how individuals determine their physical position in relation to other objects.

Field dependence studies show how individuals locate the upright in a space. In one study, subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically. Some perceived themselves as straight only in relation to their surroundings. ...some people could be tilted by as much as 35 degrees and report that they were perfectly straight, simply because they were aligned with images that were equally tilted. But not everyone did this: some managed to get themselves

more or less upright regardless of how crooked the surrounding images were. (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 29)

This passage sets the stage for understanding how the concept of the crooked room is applied to the experiences of African American women. Extrapolating from this example, Harris-Perry (2011) drew the similarities between the participants in the psychological field dependence study who are trying to align themselves and African American women who find themselves in a crooked world of full of distorted and damaging expectations. The work of African American women is to navigate their own alignment in settings where they are bombarded with crooked views of themselves, such as stereotypes that limit how they can express themselves. “When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 29).

African American women who are situated in a crooked room essentially have two choices: one is to align themselves to be “straight” according to the dimensions of the room and the other choice is to remain authentic to themselves and use their own sense of direction to determine which way is up. In the first option, using signals from the crooked room to determine how to orient herself, the African American woman has no hope for achieving her own authentic direction, but is bowing to the pressure of outside society for her to fit into a predetermined script, not of her choosing, no matter how detrimental or negative the script is. This is done in hopes of being in “alignment” with her environment. As Harris-Perry stated, “bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some

black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 29).

In choosing the second response to being in a crooked room, African American women who aim to have authentic experiences and to not succumb to the pressures of stereotypes rely on their own definitions of who they are, how they conduct themselves, and what they can become. Though this may be the desired outcome, Harris-Perry (2011) asserted “it can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room” (p. 29). In the spirit of being authentic, it is acknowledged also that there will be times to speak out against the distortions of the crooked room and times to choose to remain silent. “Sometimes black women can conquer negative myths, sometimes, they are defeated, and sometimes they choose not to fight” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 32).

Harris-Perry (2011) presented *citizenship* and *recognition* as central concepts of her work on presenting the experiences of African American women. *Citizenship* was conceptualized as “more than an individual exchange of freedom for rights; it is also membership in a body politic, a nation, and a community” (p. 37). It is within this citizenship that individuals are awarded the opportunity to belong to a community and to be recognized. Hence, *recognition*, was identified by Harris-Perry as another key theme in understanding the experiences of African American women. “Craving recognition of one’s special, inexchangeable uniqueness is part of the human condition, and it is soothed only by the opportunity to contribute freely to the public realm” (p. 38). In order for African

American women to be validated as citizens, they must have a sense of belonging within their community and be recognized within those communities.

In applying this specifically to the experiences of African American women, certain challenges become evident. African American women are often misrecognized through the perpetuation of the stereotypes presented in previous passages. Harris-Perry (2011) noted that, as a marginalized and stigmatized group, African American women are routinely denied access to communities and cannot be accurately recognized. “Inaccurate recognition [such as through depictions of negative stereotypes] is painful not only to the psyche but also to the political self, the citizen self” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 38). Harris-Perry positions recognition of African American women as a crucial component in understanding larger scale racial injustices: “Distribution inequalities of social, political, and economic goods are related to the inability to ‘see’ citizens from low-status, stigmatized groups accurately” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 42). The argument is that being recognized and *seen* are necessary for African American women to have an opportunity to be full citizens in the communities in which they interact.

Harris-Perry (2011) further stated that, in order to fully understand the crooked room in which African American women in the United States are situated, one must be aware of the impact of negative stereotypes. “Hateful stereotypes are the tools that build the crooked room” (p. 49). “Sister politics” describes the task of “challenging negative images, managing degradation, and resisting or accommodating humiliating public representation” (p. 45) that African American women often experience in trying to access their citizenship.

Sister politics are distinct and uniquely different from the experiences of white women and black men. In reflecting on these experiences, Harris-Perry asserted that “[e]ven if there is no single, universal black female experience, there are enough shared identities, beliefs, and experiences to offer insight into African American women as a group” (p. 47).

Further drawing on this idea of the crooked room and bringing the discussion into the field of education, there are additional considerations and applications to be made. Mabokela and Madsen (2007) conducted a study that examined the experiences of African American school teachers working in suburban desegregated majority schools. The authors found that African American teachers reported four specific areas that presented considerable challenges to their performance in the school system. First, participants in this study noted that they were *highly visible* within their schools where they were the clear racial minority. This high visibility lead to their actions being closely scrutinized as well as them being expected to fulfill stereotypical roles in their schools. In linking this to the concept of *recognition*, despite the fact that the African American teachers in this study were highly visible, they were still not able to experience authentic recognition.

A second theme identified by Mabokela and Madsen relates to *symbolic consequences*, or the “pressure placed on minority group members to be representatives of their race in response to stereotypical beliefs of their majority peers, and the subsequent treatment that follows from that stereotyped portrayal” (p. 1187). Participants in the study reported that white colleagues did not see

them as true African Americans because they did not fit into the stereotypes with which they were familiar as portrayed in the media, for example. This provides another of misrecognition by means of misrepresentation of the African American teachers through stereotypes.

Mabokela and Madsen (2007) presented *fighting discrepant qualities* as a third theme uncovered in their research. Having to “prove worth” was a key finding described specifically by the African American female teachers who participated in the study. The African American female teachers reported that being viewed as unqualified, being defined by their color, and having to fight to have their accomplishments recognized. In these instances, the teachers reported that they were questioned about their qualifications to teach and asked if they were part of the affirmative action program. Additionally, the African American women teachers in this study were placed into a crooked room based on the tasks they were asked to do. African American teachers in Mabokela and Madsen’s (2007) study reported perceptions that they had been hired as a “Black expert” whose sole purpose was to teach Black students.

A final theme Mabokela and Madsen (2007) uncovered in their work was *cultural switching*. The authors relate this concept to code switching, described as occurring when “African Americans act, think, dress, and express themselves in ways that maximize the comfort level of the group or organization to minimize their differences” (Mabokela & Madsen, 2007, p. 1196). The term cultural switching was used over code switching because “it was apparent that although the participants used some forms of code switching, it was not intended to

diminish them or to allow the European American colleagues to feel comfortable about their presence in the school” (Mabokela & Madsen, 2007, p. 1196).

Teachers employed this cultural switching as an adaption to manage discrimination they experienced.

The African American teacher participants in this study were clearly attempting to navigate the crooked rooms in their school buildings. Reports from the participants revealed two primary responses to interactions with white colleagues. First, some of the African American female teachers navigated this crooked room by learning normative cues and becoming “diplomatic learners” who observed and tested their interactions with their white colleagues. The agenda of these teachers was to use their diplomacy to make their opinions known without intimidating the white faculty. A second response among the African American female teachers was to be more “direct, forthright, and assertive” which allowed teachers to affirm their presence by being outspoken and confronting head-on racist cultural norms Mabokela & Madsen, 2007, p. 1198).

**Shifting.** Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) referred to the concept of *shifting* as they describe the experiences of African American women in the United States. Shifting refers to a change in mannerism or behavior; this change can be physical, mental, linguistic, or other and is seen as “subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society” (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 6). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) asserted that “Black women in America expend substantial psychic energy on managing the threats of racial and gender bias” (p. 60). These threats often result in generating feelings of shame, low self-esteem or fear and anxiety, as such,

Jones and Shorter-Gooden reported that African American women engaged in shifting to modify the way they think or lower their expectations and thereby manage these negative feelings.

This concept of changing oneself is echoed also in Mabokela and Madsen's (2007) account of "cultural switching" which is applied to the response of "cultural incongruity between the cultural norms of the female African American teachers and European American teachers" (p. 1180). The concepts of shifting and cultural switching hold significance in the experiences of African American women educators as a means to navigate their surroundings and ultimately gain recognition.

### **Counter-Narratives**

Thus far, information has been presented on the current outlook and past experiences of African American women in the United States that impact their current marginalized status. It is apparent from this information that African American women have been marginalized in United States society. In light of the previous research presented on the impact of stereotypes about African American women, existence in a crooked room, double consciousness, and double jeopardy, the need is apparent for theory that allows for the authentic expression of African American women. Therefore, two theories, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminism, which recognize and value (rather than compare or view through a mainstream lens) the unique experiences of African American women are presented below.

**Critical Race Theory.** Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be thought of as both a theoretical viewpoint and an activist movement that calls attention to inequalities and social injustices. CRT as a framework was born out of the CRT movement. Delgado and



Stefancic (2012) described this movement as “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power ... critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (p. 3). CRT originated in the 1970s as part of a multidisciplinary effort from lawyers, activists, and legal scholars determined to address the stagnation of progress made during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. “Realizing that new theories and strategies were needed to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground, early writhers, such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, put their minds to the task” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 4). Activists involved in CRT work at this time realized that, although the Civil Rights Movement had made substantial gains in combating overtly discriminatory laws that made racism legal, there was still work to be done. CRT scholars recognized that there still existed “subtler” forms of racism that resulted in inequalities that impacted the ability of marginalized populations to make substantial gains.

Merriam-Webster (2015) defined theory as “an idea or set of ideas intended to explain facts or events” (2015). Applying this to CRT, I define CRT as a collection of ideas from multiple disciplines that seek to question and expose racism and its effects on marginalized populations. The specific ideology of scholars who have collaborated to expand the collective work of CRT is presented below, as a central tenet of CRT is the belief of incorporating ideas and information from multiple disciplines. CRT founders incorporated material from a variety of sources ranging from European philosophers to the “American radical tradition exemplified by such figures as Sojourner Truth, Frederick

Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, César Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Power and Chicano movements of the sixties and early seventies” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 5). Pulling from such a large knowledge base and working in such a varied group of contributors resulted in a comprehensive theoretical practice with key understandings of the theory outlined below.

1. Racism is ordinary, not aberrational—“normal science,” the usual way that society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country. In the current system of power in the United States, there exists a “white-over-color” ascendancy that serves important purposes- both psychic and material (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 7).
2. “Interest convergence” or “material determinism,” a featured theme of CRT, points out that racism benefits both white elites and white working class people and the result is that large populations in society have little incentive in working to eradicate racism. Derrick Bell exemplifies this concept citing that the ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education* may have resulted more from the self-interest of elite whites than from a desire to help black peoples (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 8).
3. CRT theorists subscribe to social constructionist thought and posit that the concepts of race and races are products of social thought and relations. “Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (p. 8).

4. CRT theorists are interested in exposing differential racialization and the consequences thereof. CRT has drawn attention to how dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times in response to changing needs of the labor market or political climate for example. “At one period, for example, society may have had little use for blacks but much need for Mexican or Japanese agricultural workers. At another time, the Japanese, including citizens of longstanding, may have been in intense disfavor and removed to war relocation camps...” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 9).
5. Intersectionality posits that no person has a single, easily state, unitary identity. “Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (p. 10).
6. CRT recognizes the value of unique voices of color. “...the voice-of-color thesis holds that, because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, Black, American Indian, Asian, and Latina/o writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 10).

CRT is used as the theoretical framework for this study as it is particularly useful in examining issues of race and education. Solorzano and Yosso (2002), stated that “critical race theory in education is a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (p. 25). Additionally, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) posited that,

when considering critical race theory in education, one has to have the understanding that “race and racism are endemic, permanent” and a central factor in accounting for the experiences of marginalized populations (p. 25). Essentially, the authors stated that there is no purpose in considering arguments that do not include conversations of the impact of race and racism in education as any lasting reform will have to acknowledge and address issues of racism that exist at the core of the educational system in the United States.

Solorzano and Yosso outlined elements of CRT and applied them specifically to the field of education:

*The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination.* “A critical race methodology in education also acknowledges the intercentricity of racialized oppression - the layers of subordination based on race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality” (p. 25). Solorzano and Yosso asserted that class alone, or lack of access to resources, cannot provide a full explanation for the discrimination that people experience. All identities that a person holds must be considered in their totality in order to begin to understand the complex impact of the interwoven identities.

*The challenge to dominant ideology.* “A critical race theory challenges the traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). CRT scholars reject these traditional beliefs and expose them as “camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in the U.S. society” (Solorzano, 1997 in Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p.26). In a CRT framework, these concepts developed and

approved by dominant ideology set the stage for marginalized populations to be viewed as at fault for their own lack of success.

*The commitment to social justice.* CRT scholars are committed to furthering social justice and empowering marginalized groups through offering a counter-response to racial, gender, and class oppression. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) see educational institutions as contradictory in that they have the “potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower” (p. 26). By helping educators to recognize the potential of schools to both help and harm, educators are challenged to engage in social action.

*The centrality of experiential knowledge.* “Critical race theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Furthermore, this knowledge is seen as a strength and used in telling counter-narratives to counter dominant teachings that employ a deficit model to convey the experiences of people of color. Critical race theorists assert that the experiential knowledge of marginalized populations shared directly from individuals in these groups is necessary component to the work of CRT in education.

*The transdisciplinary perspective.* CRT scholars attest to the value of seeking input from multiple disciplines (such as ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, and law for example) and considering them in historical and present contexts. It is necessary to consider the perspectives and accounts from different fields at different times to be able to present a comprehensive framework for understanding the experiences of marginalized populations.

CRT was used as a framework for this study to give voice to the experiences of African American women educators within a public school setting that may have previously not been heard. CRT focuses deliberately on closely examining issues of race and thereby serves as a lens through which I examine the critical factors, constructs, and variables that contribute to understanding the experiences of African American women educators. Because of the large role that storytelling plays in my current research, further detail and explanation of storytelling, counter-stories, narratives, and counter-narratives are presented below.

Critical race theorists understand that there exists a “master-narrative” created and perpetuated by dominant white culture that dictates conversations surrounding power and oppression in U.S. society. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) addressed this master narrative and its impact in education: “the ideology of racism creates, maintains, and justifies the use of a ‘master narrative’ in storytelling. It is within the context of racism that ‘monovocal’ stories about the low educational achievement and attainment of students of color are told. Unacknowledged white privilege helps maintain racism’s stories” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27).

Furthermore, the authors noted that “because ‘majoritarian’ stories [master narratives] generate from a legacy of racial privilege, they are stories in which racial privilege seems ‘natural’. These stories are perpetuated by whites in power because the stories work to their advantage. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) assert that “a majoritarian story is one that privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference” (p. 28). For

those marginalized groups who do not fit into this normative ideal, they are portrayed in the majoritarian stories as the *others* or *outsiders*.

Finally, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) reflected on the pervasiveness and power of these master narratives on all groups involved, stating that “people of color often buy into and even tell majoritarian stories” (p. 28). For this reason, it is imperative that African Americans are given the opportunity to tell our own stories in our own voices. With this understanding, it is clear that there is a need to present the viewpoints that counter these master narratives. *Counter-narratives* were conceptualized in this work as narratives that provide an alternate to dominant culture stories. This term stems from Solorzano and Yosso (2002):

We define the counter-story as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. Yet, counter-stories need not be created only as a direct response to majoritarian stories. ... Indeed, within the histories and lives of people of color, there are numerous unheard counter-stories. Storytelling and counter-storytelling these experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32)

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) further expanded upon the concept of storytelling and counter-storytelling by presenting distinct types of counter-

narratives and stories: *personal stories or narratives, other people's stories or narratives, and composite stories or narratives.*

Personal stories or narratives recount an individual's experiences with various forms of racism and sexism. Often these personal counter-stories are autobiographical reflections of the author, juxtaposed with their critical race analysis ... and within the context of a larger sociopolitical critique.

(Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32)

The present study was closely aligned with the format of a *personal story* in the sense that I will present my own experiences and analysis of impact within the larger social structure of the school setting as well as reflecting on the impact of political climate of the United States.

In telling *other people's stories or narratives*, the third person voice is used to "reveal experiences and responses to racism and sexism" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 33). Additionally, it is noted that this type of counter-narrative typically reports on "biographical analysis of the experiences of a person of color, again in relation to U.S. institutions and in a sociohistorical context" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 33). My current research will incorporate this type of counter-narrative by presenting the stories of participants gleaned from information shared during their interviews.

*Composite stories or narratives* are derived from "various forms of 'data' to recount the racialized, sexualized, and classed experiences of people of color" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 33). The authors pointed out that these stories may contain "both biographical and autobiographical analyses because the authors



create composite characters and place them in social, historical, and political situations to discuss racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 33). This form of creating stories may be used in education to construct lessons that provide an alternate narrative to dominant stories that are primarily told in U.S. classrooms.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) also reflected on the practice of counter-narratives and storytelling, emphasizing the significance of *voice* and *naming one’s own reality* as key components of CRT. The authors outlined three main reasons for naming one’s own reality. The first purpose reflects on the legal roots of CRT citing the tendency to practice under a universal system of right and wrong, wherein the rules are written by members of the dominant culture. Within this system, anything that diverges from the mainstream is discounted and slapped with “the unscholarly labels of ‘emotional’, ‘literary’, ‘personal’, or ‘false’ (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). The authors then present the CRT response to this which argues “political and moral analysis is situational... social reality is constructed by the formulation and the exchange of stories about individual situations” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). Given these two opposing notions, it becomes clear that the value of naming one’s own reality through counter-narratives is to construct a reality wherein the perspectives of marginalized groups can be recognized and valued.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) gave as a second reason for naming one’s own reality, “psychic preservation of marginalized groups” which refers to the notion that minority group members can experience psychological benefit through having their stories told (p. 57). The authors suggested that storytelling has therapeutic benefit: “the

story of one's condition leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated and allows one to stop inflicting mental violence on oneself" (p. 57). This attests to the restorative power of sharing stories and highlights the need to present stories that frame racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in a way that counters the dominant narrative of white culture.

Finally, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) reasoned that naming one's own reality with stories can affect the oppressor. The authors presented the notion that racist and sexist practices are not always recognized as oppressive behavior in the eyes of the oppressor. Often those in power justify their control and authority by using stories from their own constructed reality. Ladson-Billings and Tate asserted that "stories by people of color can catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism" (1995, p. 58). Essentially, the argument here is that by hearing stories from marginalized groups that differ from the majoritarian perspective, people from the dominant culture are confronted with and challenged by a new narrative that conflicts with their assumed universal truths. In the wake of this confrontation, members of the dominant culture may be awakened to then consider what they have held as absolute truths and begin to recognize the oppression and racism.

CRT gives great importance to the voices of minority groups that have been historically silenced. Ladson-Billings stated that "...without authentic voices of people of color (as teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members) it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.58). Following this idea, there has been an increase in research dedicated to presenting a forum for the previously silenced or discounted stories of

marginalized people. LatCrit, or Latina/o Critical Race Theory, a branch extended from CRT that examines the experiences unique to the Latina/o community has been employed by researchers to share their works in examining oppression in society (Espino, 2012; Fujimoto, 2013; Huber, 2010). Other studies have incorporated the use of CRT storytelling to uncover the role of power and privilege in establishing policies and practices (Iverson, 2007; Sue et al., 2007). Still other works have incorporated a counter storytelling to address the complexities of race and racism in schools and even teacher education programs. Patton and Catching (2009) asserted that composite “counter-stories are not fictional, but instead grounded in actual life experiences” (p. 716). Additionally, the authors noted that by presenting the counter-story, readers are shown a look “into the lives of composite characters that explicate the hegemonic and overlapping nature of race, racism, and power” (Patton & Catching, 2009, p.717). Through communicating the counter stories of marginalized people, mainstream narratives that support oppression and racism are challenged and thereby allow for authentic recognition of those who have previously been misrepresented.

### **Black Feminism.**

*The colored girl... is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term ‘problem’, and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelopes and obscures her.* Fannie Barrier Williams, 1905 (Collins, 2009, p.5)

Black feminism arose from the need to provide a platform from which Black women in the United States can speak out against social injustices. Collins (2000) asserted that “[a]s long as Black women’s subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist

response to that oppression will remain needed” (p. 25). Collins specifically pointed to the need to have a framework from which to examine the experiences and history of African American women in the United States. “...[T]he convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another. It also created the political context for Black women’s intellectual work.” (Collins, 2009, p. 6).

Collins (2009) presented three main, interdependent areas in which African American women are oppressed and articulates the oppression and lasting effects associated with each dimension. To begin with, Collins addressed employment and political challenges faced by Black women. Collins asserted that Black women have been exploited in the labor market by citing historical enslavement and contemporary over-representation of Black women in low-paying service industries. Collins also addressed the political oppression that Black women have endured, such as being denied the right to vote, being excluded from holding positions in public office, and withholding equitable treatment in the criminal justice systems. Second, Collins included educational institutions as political arenas where Black women have been disenfranchised, referring here to historically and presently racially segregated, underfunded public schools. It is within these educational systems that Black women are either supported in their pursuits or further oppressed. Recognizing the damning effectiveness that historical discriminatory practices had and still has in limiting African Americans’ access to education, Collins lamented that Black students who were able to exit the school system with a quality education were the “exception rather than the rule” (Collins, 2009, p. 7).

Finally, Collins referred to “controlling images” of Black women that have been constructed to keep Black women oppressed and to justify that oppression. These images, previously addressed within a previous subsection on stereotypes included: mammy, jezebel, and welfare mothers for example.

The result of these three intertwined dimensions of oppression has been “a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African American women in an assigned, subordinate place” (Collins, 2009, p. 7). Furthermore, Collins pointed out that “Black women’s exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite white male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women’s ideas and interests in traditional scholarship” (Collins, 2009, p. 7). Collins spoke to a system that was developed to maintain Black women in a subservient position and acknowledges that there must be another self-defined manner in which African American women can be viewed.

Collins outlined six distinguishing features of Black Feminist Thought that she posits as essential to understanding the unique experiences of African American women:

***Intersecting oppressions of race and gender.*** Collins stated that the main purpose of Black feminist thought is to resist oppression and includes in this statement the practices of oppression as well as the ideas that rationalize oppression. Collins impressed upon readers the importance of considering the intersectionality of race and gender, insisting that “if intersecting oppressions did not exist, Black feminist thought and similar oppositional knowledges would be unnecessary” (Collins, 2009, p. 25).

***Diverse responses to common challenges within Black Feminism.*** Collins reflected on the experiences and ideas of African American women, noting that although

there are similarities in the experiences that African American women have, it should not be expected that the responses to these experiences will be identical among all African American women. “On one hand, all African American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely derogates women of African descent. Despite the fact that U.S. Black women face common challenges, this neither means that individual African American women have all had the same experiences nor that we agree on the significance of our varying experiences” (Collins, p. 29). In essence, Collins recognized that African American women can and will conceptualize their challenging experiences (institutionalized racism and social class differences for example) in uniquely individual manners. Black feminist thought does not claim to be a one-size-fits-all approach.

*Dialogical relationship and group knowledge.* Collins stated that “as members of an oppressed group, U.S. Black women have generated alternative practices and knowledge that have been designed to foster U.S. Black women’s group empowerment” (Collins, 2009, p.33). As part of seeking empowerment, “Black feminist thought encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a group” (Collins, 2009, p. 35). Collins drew a distinction between the dialectical relationships and dialogical relationships to provide further understanding the experiences of African American women. Collins depicted the relationship between oppression and activism as dialectical-seeing that this relationship is driven by responding to an opposing force- oppression. In the dialogical relationship, Collins saw a greater awareness: “On both the individual and the group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be

accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness” (Collins, 2009, p. 34). With the goal being raised consciousness and opportunities for African American women to determine their own definitions of self, Collins recognized the merits of engaging in dialogical relationships.

*Contributions of African American women intellectuals.* Collins viewed Black women intellectuals and their contributions as central to Black feminist thought for several reasons. First, “our experiences as African American women provide us with a unique angle of vision concerning Black womanhood unavailable to other groups” (Collins, 2009, p. 39). Collins asserted that it is crucial to consider the insider view of African American women when discussing the issues that impact African American women. Second, “Black women intellectuals both inside and outside the academy are less likely to walk away from Black women’s struggles when the obstacles seem overwhelming or when the rewards for staying diminish” (Collins, 2009, p.39). Collins referred here to a commitment of support within a community of African American women.

Third, “Black women intellectuals from all walks of life must aggressively push the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one’s own agenda is essential to empowerment” (Collins, 2009, p. 40). Collins recognized that self-definition was a necessary component to empowerment and recognizes the specific significance for African American women, in particular, as a group that has not been afforded self-definition.

Fourth, “Black women intellectuals are central in the production of Black feminist thought because we alone can foster the group autonomy that fosters effective coalitions

with other groups” (Collins, 2009, p. 40). African American women represent a diverse group in terms of age, accomplishment, class, and education. Collins insisted that African American women intellectuals do not have to be awarded higher education degrees or certain accomplishments in order to be recognized as intellectuals capable of being leaders. Furthermore, Collins called upon African American women to work in concert with one another: “Black women intellectuals must find ways to place our own heterogeneous experiences and consciousness at the center of any serious efforts to develop Black feminist thought without having our thought become separatist and exclusionary” (Collins, 2009, p. 41).

*Black feminism as dynamic and changing.* Neither Black feminist thought nor Black feminist practice can be static. As social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them. Collins provided a framework and key understanding through Black feminist thought that can be applied to changes in society and politics.

*Black feminist thought and relationship to other social justice projects.* Collins framed Black feminist thought in relation to a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice, pointing to the need for human solidarity without which any political movement may be doomed to fail. This theory provides a platform on which African American women can have voice and recognition without being in competition with other oppressed groups.

Another key theme presented in Black feminist theory is the concept of self-definition. “Why this theme of self-definition should preoccupy African American women is not surprising. Black women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to



reconcile the contradictions separating their own internally defined images of self as African American women with our objectification as the Other” (Collins, 2009, p. 110). Furthermore, Collins reflected on the impact of being seen only within a group and not as an individual: “The category of “Black woman” makes all U.S. Black women especially visible and open to the objectification of Black women as a category. This group treatment potentially renders each individual African American woman invisible as fully human. But paradoxically, being treated as an invisible *Other* places U.S. Black women in an outsider-within position that has stimulated creativity for many”. (Collins, 2009, p. 110). Collins asserted that self-definition is of key importance for African American women though it remains a challenge to do so in a racist, sexist, elitist society.

Finally, Black feminist thought was presented in this review of literature as it provided an important consideration on the significance of knowledge on empowerment. Collins reflected on essential understandings of Black feminist thought:

First Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigm shift in how we think about unjust power relations. By embracing a paradigm of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, as well as Black women’s individual and collective agency within them, Black feminist thought reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance. Second, Black feminist thought addresses ongoing epistemological debates concerning the power dynamics that underlie what counts as knowledge. Offering U.S. Black women new knowledge about our own experiences can be empowering. But activating epistemologies that criticize prevailing knowledge and that enable us to

define our own realities *on our own terms* has far greater implications  
(Collins, 2009, pp. 291-292).

### **School Climate**

Literature on school climate is presented in this study as it is significant to understanding the setting of public schools. School climate, as defined by Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie (1997), is “the quality and consistency of interpersonal interaction within the school community that influences children’s cognitive, social, and psychological development” (p. 322). The National School Climate Center (2012) more simply defined school climate as “the quality and character of school life” (p.2). The term school climate has gained increased attention in recent years and though the exact definition may vary from one publication to the next, there has been growing consensus surrounding four specific areas considered to be the “essential areas of focus” (Center for Emotional and Social Education, 2010, p.1):

*Safety* (e.g. rules and norms; physical safety; social-emotional safety);  
*Relationships* (e.g. respect for diversity; school connectedness/engagement; social support – adults; social support – students; leadership); *Teaching and Learning* (e.g. social, emotional, ethical and civic learning; support for learning; professional relationships); and *the Institutional Environment* (e.g. physical surrounding). (Center for Emotional and Social Education, 2010, p. 1)

Though each area is vital to the successful development of students, for the purposes of this paper, *relationships* will be a key focus. The Center for Emotional and

Social Education (2010), pointed out that “One of the most important aspects of relationships in school is how connected people feel to one another” (p. 3).

Professionals working in the field of education have come to recognize the importance of having a positive school climate and the impact that it has on student adjustment and achievement (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997). Teachers, counselors, and administrators are seen as the adult leaders of the school environment and as such, the climate surrounding among these educational professionals plays a significant role in the overall school climate and the student climate. More specifically, the adults in the building often set the tone for the experiences students will have. Whether that be how teachers treat students in their classrooms, how counselors interact with their students, or how administrators respond to their students, adult interaction with students is critical when considering the experience of students. Additionally, attention must be given to the intra-adult interactions that take place in schools as these interactions are often visible to students and may affect the perceptions students have regarding the value of relationships in general, and towards certain adults, in particular.

**African Americans and school climate.** The National School Climate Center (NSCC) asserted a clear stance on the importance and relevance of school climate and equity: “Equity is intrinsic to all aspects of school climate work. It is not a separate issue” (Ross, 2013, p. 1). This statement illuminates the importance placed upon creating an environment that welcomes diversity. Ross (2013) further developed the expression of equity in school climate by offering a modification on the NSCCs standard definition of school climate to include:

“The quality and character of school life that fosters children’s, youth’s, and families’ full access to: (1) Appropriately supported, high expectations for learning and achievement; (2) Emotionally and physically safe, healthy learning environments; (3) Caring relationships with peers and adults; (4) Participation that meaningfully enhances academic, social-emotional, civic, and moral development. An equitable school climate responds to the wide range of cultural norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, leadership practices, and organizational structures within the broader community. (Ross, 2013, pp. 1-2)

Several studies have addressed the relationship between student achievement and school climate. In a 2004 report from the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, an analysis of teacher diversity found that “increasing the percentage of teachers of color in classrooms is connected directly to closing the achievement gap.” Despite these findings, African American students continue to experience lower rates of academic achievement than their white peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) and in an effort to address this achievement gap educators and scholars have given attention to myriad factors that impact achievement.

Ogbu (2003) considered school climate as it pertains specifically to race relations in school, particularly taking a look at the low academic performance of Black American students in one two-thirds white, affluent suburb. Employing a cultural-ecological theory that stresses the importance of contemplating numerous factors (such as historical, economic, cultural, and social perspectives), Ogbu conducted a large scale study in an attempt to uncover the reasons for a performance gap in this community. In reflecting

upon the complexities of factors that account for the achievement gap, Ogbu (2003) addressed two key concepts that relate directly to school climate: the system and community forces. The system refers to “the way society and its institutions treat or have treated the minorities” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 45). Viewing this through the lens of school climate, this can be seen as examination of the institution of the school and relationships within the school community. Ogbu described community forces as “the way members of a minority group perceive, interpret, and respond to education as a result of their unique history and adaptations to their minority status in the United States (Ogbu, 2003, p. 46).

Ogbu addressed the importance of relationships between students and their teachers. “Nonimmigrant minorities interpret their relationship with schools and teachers within the context of the overall enduring conflict between them and white Americans. As a result, they are more concerned with how they are treated in the curriculum and whether schools and teachers “care for them” than with teachers’ expertise in knowledge, skills, and language” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 53). Essentially, African American students care more about how their teachers treat them than the level of knowledge that their teachers have. Relationships are the crux of a solid educational foundation.

### **Culturally Competent Collaboration and Consultation**

Collaboration is simply defined as the act of working together. Applied to the field of education, collaborative consultation is defined as “a process in which a trained, school-based consultant, working in an egalitarian, nonhierarchical relationship with a consultee, assists that person in her efforts to make decisions and carry out plans that will be in the best interest of her students.” (Kampwirth, 2006, p. 3). Collaboration has been

cited as a necessary practice in professional settings. Edwards, Beverly, and Alexander-Snow (2011) addressed the significance of professional collaboration as a means of recognizing career success in higher education:

Given that access to social networks within their departments and institutions have emerged as a significant issue for Black female faculty, it is important that Department chairs utilize their positions to influence the involvement of non-Black faculty and senior faculty to provide opportunities for Black female faculty to engage in research and teaching activities. (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 23)

As collaborative work has received increased attention over the years, so has the research surrounding how to create more effective practices for collaboration. Important themes have been identified as necessary components to have effective collaboration: authentic, honest communication, willingness from both parties to engage in the process of consultation, and a focus on seeking solutions (Kampwirth, 2006). In considering collaborative consultation through a CRT lens, several studies are presented below that address imbalances in power and the need to engage in authentic conversation surrounding race and racism.

**Power.** Power is addressed in collaborative consultation literature in varying degrees. Kampwirth (2006) noted that although a key concept of collaborative consultation is that the relationship between consultee and consultant is meant to be egalitarian and non-hierarchical, power dynamics may play a part in the relationship. CRT posits that issues related to power imbalances are present whenever race enters the conversation. In instances where the professionals engaged in collaboration are of

different racial backgrounds, it is necessary to address the underlying issues surrounding race and implied power structures. Matias and Liou (2014) recognized the need for being explicit about the importance of addressing race directly, but acknowledge that current educational policies that endorse ‘colorblind’ practices make this candidness difficult to achieve. As a CRT researcher, I recognize the salience of race in all conversations and exhibit a willingness to engage in conversations about race that may cause discomfort.

**Authentic and honest communication.** In order for communication to be open and honest, a sense of trust must exist between both parties. At the foundation of establishing a trusting relationship is the premise that one party must be willing to be vulnerable toward the other party (Giscombe, et al., 2011). Without this trusting relationship, the collaborative process is halted. In addition to employing the suggestions of standard texts on educational consultation, it is necessary to “be sure that you are honest and dependable” (Kampwirth, 2006, p. 109).

Achenstein (2002) organized an extensive review of power differentials through presenting the important role micropolitics plays in teacher collaboration, giving considerable insight on three concepts (conflict, border politics and ideology) which she found “proved to be critical dimensions that impacted the nature of organizational learning” (2002, p. 425). Because of this critical significance, these concepts are presented in detail.

According to Achenstein, “conflict can be understood as both a situation and an ongoing process in which views and behaviors diverge (or apparently diverge) or are perceived to be to some degree incompatible” (2002, p. 425). Conflict can be viewed as a routine part of collaboration that arises when differences in views, opinions, values, and

norms occur. Additionally, Achenstein noted that changes to policies that disrupt current ways of functioning may bring about conflict as the involved parties negotiate the process. In applying this directly to her research, Achenstein presented the stories of two schools and their approaches to dealing with conflict. At one end of a continuum, is a school that has adopted an avoidant stance which Achenstein described as including “approaches to conflict that sustain a highly bonded and harmonious community through the exclusion or suppression of dissent” (2002, p. 442). Often in these school communities, the focus is on reaching and maintaining consensus and thereby avoiding the real issues that needed to be addressed through a collaborative relationship. Statements of “we don’t see the conflict” and “if you are not going to conform, then you’re going to leave” demonstrate their stance on suppressing conflict (Achenstein, 2002, p. 442). In contrast, the other school “acknowledged diversity of beliefs and practice, found space for dissent in a public arena, and at times critically reflected on and accepted a variety of conflicts” (Achenstein, 2002, p. 442). Through embracing the conflicts that arose during collaborative work, the teachers found that real change was able to take place.

Achenstein used the term “border politics” to refer to “the micropolitical processes of negotiating the bounds of membership and beliefs of a given community” (p. 426). The concept of borders translates to communities in schools, essentially defining who is in and who is out, who belongs and who does not. The insiders determine who is listened to and whose ideas will be respected. Achenstein found in her study that the school that avoided conflict tended to deal with border politics by excluding those whose views did not conform to majority rules as this stance allowed the teachers involved to



maintain consensus. The school that was open to embracing conflict had a more diverse community with open boundaries. Achenstein found that in this second school, though there was more dissent and diversity in perspectives, “there was still a unity of commitment found in their shared ideology of schooling for social justice and equity” (2002, p. 444).

Finally, Achenstein presented the concept of ideology; in a micropolitical sense, ideology refers to “the management of meaning, how individuals and communities make sense of their work and ultimately take action” (Ball, 1987, as cited in Achenstein, 2002). Within an educational setting, ideology represents a “framework of shared values about education, schooling, and students” which includes “...an orientation about student learning and outcomes, notions about how school should reform and change, and conceptions about the relationship between school and society” (Achenstein, 2002, p. 427). Achenstein impressed the importance of considering ideology as it relates to teacher practices. “Teachers, individually and collectively, hold values that shape their practice. The content of a teacher community’s ideology, especially as it pertains to values about education, schooling, and students does matter. These conceptions frame how school is enacted” (Achenstein, 2002, p. 427). As clearly outlined by Achenstein, ideology must be considered as a point of potential conflict within collaboration, as often when teachers come together they have different values and expectations.

Thayer-Bacon (1995) addressed the impact of racial and ethnic diversity on collaboration in higher education. Understanding that collaboration in ethnically and racially diverse settings may have complex issues, Thayer-Bacon spoke to the need for involved parties to have an awareness of the impact of racism in the United States.

Understanding that the voices of African Americans have historically been silenced as a result of racist laws, policies, and practices, Thayer-Bacon asserted that “collaborators need to feel safe to speak and believe that they will be heard, that they have a role in this effort and their voice is valued” (1995, p. 10). In this statement, Thayer-Bacon demonstrated how large scale politics have an immediate impact on the intimate relationships in which collaborative work occurs.

Bangou and Austin (2011) examined the impact of race on collaboration in a teacher education program and found that “collaboration is indeed affected by institutionalized racial expectations grounded in power relations” (p. 46). Bangou and Austin also addressed issues related to voice and power in collaboration, finding that it is important to bring race into the conversation despite the fact that “talking about race did not make the majority of us feel comfortable” (2011, p. 44). The authors stated that if issues surrounding race are not directly addressed and purposefully brought into the foreground, participants in collaborative work may end up perpetuating the concept of “invisibility of race in the narratives” (Bangou & Austin, 2011, p. 44). When participants engage in this behavior, they run the risk of taking part in *contrived collegiality* or the tendency to be falsely committed to working together. Often, parties in this type of collaborative relationship agree to let issues about race go unvoiced, instead choosing to avoid open discussion, likely out of fear that engaging in conversations about race will “create rather than avert racial tensions” (Tatum & Brown, 1998, p. 12).

Thayer-Bacon pointed out that conflict arises when African American cultures (as well as Native American, Hispanic/Latina/o, and Asian cultures) that have historically valued cooperation and collaboration, attempt to operate in systems that embrace

Eurocentric worldviews that place value on individualism and competition “at the expense of cooperating with others” (Thayer-Bacon, 1995, p. 8). Noting the importance and value of collaboration in higher education for increased success, Thayer-Bacon made the following suggestions for successful collaboration: a) enhanced multicultural education for faculty, administrators, and students; b) on-going training to elevate sensitivity and responsiveness to cultural influences on learning styles, communication patterns, respect building; c) genuine and heightened efforts to build community through development of trust and respect, and the building of relational skills/interpersonal skills/communication skills and sharing time together; d) willingness to work together and a desire to participate; e) understanding of your worldview and the worldview of those with whom you collaborate (Thayer-Bacon, 1995, p. 10-11).

In addition to considering the implications of within group diversity among professionals engaging in collaborative work, several studies have cited the importance of having a multicultural awareness that encourages effective collaboration with African American students and families (Grothaus & Cole, 2010; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010; Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Dodson-Sims, 2005). Duke (2004) addressed the need for further studies surrounding the impact of teacher diversity on the process of professional collaboration after conducting a meta-analysis on 26 studies of teacher collaborative efforts and finding that none of the studies addressed racism or other areas of oppression. Though professional collaboration has received increased attention in recent years, a review of literature reveals that there is a dearth of information on the specific experiences of African American women K-12 public school educators. Exploring issues related to professional collaboration and consultation helps set the stage

to understand the experiences of African American women educators working in their school environments.

### **Considering Altered Realities for African American Women Educators**

The term *altered reality* refers to a heightened awareness experienced by African Americans that includes a keen cognizance of injustice, not belonging, being undervalued, and trying to make oneself fit or matter in specific circumstances. African American women educators working in predominantly white public schools may experience an awareness of injustice in the form of microaggressions. In school systems that are seemingly progressive and intolerant of overt types of racism, microinsults and microinvalidations may be more prevalent. The insidious nature of microinsults and microinvalidations make them even more dangerous as they are intangible occurrences that cause those targeted to struggle to conceptualize and make meaning of these incidents.

Harris-Perry (2011) presented two key closely related concepts that hold substantial importance in understanding how African American women educators experience altered realities: *citizenship* and *recognition*. Certain parallels can be drawn from Harris-Perry's conceptualization of citizenship as it pertains to experiencing membership in society at large and applied specifically within the microcosm of a public school community. At its foundational meaning, citizenship refers to a sense of membership and individuals feeling as though they belong. The altered reality that may be experienced by African American women educators is having a heightened awareness that they do not belong, that they are not part of the mainstream school community.

The last two components comprising the concept of altered realities- being undervalued and trying to make oneself fit or matter within the individual's surroundings- are directly related to the concept of *recognition*. The goal of recognition is to allow expression of the individual's authentic self. Unchallenged stereotypes of African American women may further perpetuate misperceptions and result in African American women educators not being valued for their worth as educators. An example of this is in having their expertise limited to dealing only in subservient, menial positions within schools such as being assigned to supervise the In School Suspension program, or being asked for their input only when it applies to interacting with African American students. This latter example fits under the term "cultural encapsulation"—originally coined by Wrenn (1962). Wines et al. (2014) described cultural encapsulation as "being culturally isolated or reclusive, in the sense of feeling isolated from the dominant culture because of the lack of knowledge and understanding of relationships with persons of other cultures" (p. 68).

Moreover, African American women educators have the daunting task of having to carve out a space wherein they matter and can have their voices heard. The added challenge for African American women educators is to navigate these systems that have historically marginalized them while at the same time combatting racial and gender stereotypes. The experiences of African American women educators is a truly unique perspective and in exploring these stories, the complexities of the intersectionality of race and gender becomes apparent.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I provided a review of literary topics that are important to consider when discussing the experiences of African American women educators. Historical perspective of critical incidents, such as access to education and stereotypes, that help shape the experiences of African American women educators were presented. Additionally, education related issues such as school climate and consultation were presented.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

In this chapter in-depth information is presented to outline the rationale for using qualitative research methods to better understand the experiences of African American women educators working in predominantly white public school districts. Further described in this chapter are the following: a comprehensive explanation of critical race methodology, a rationale for using a qualitative research design, and specific information regarding data collection, participant selection, and data analysis. The following research questions were addressed using methodology outlined in this chapter:

1. How do African American women educators experience being in a crooked room?
2. How are African American women educators impacted by navigating both formal and informal roles within predominantly white school systems?
3. How do African American women educators successfully navigate their work in the public school system?

The research questions were developed after preliminary investigative research and a review of literature found a lack of information on the unique perspectives of African American women educators in public school settings. The review of literature provided information about African Americans in education contexts, stereotypes of African American women, altered realities experienced by African American women, concepts related to counter narratives, school climate, and professional collaboration. The information on the collective interactions of these concepts to provide insight on the

experiences of African American women educators, however, was limited. Hence, the researcher sought to gain a better understanding of the interplay of these factors from the perspectives of African American women educators.

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using qualitative research methods. Qualitative research “refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things” (Berg, 2009, p. 3), whereas quantitative research is focused on the “counts and numbers of things” (Berg, 2009, p. 3). Attention is called to the intentional selection of using qualitative research methods rather than quantitative research methods because the focus of this study was meant to understand the experiences of African American women educators. This study did not seek to make generalizable statements about causation, nor did it set to prove or disprove specific hypotheses. Hence quantitative methodology was rejected as a research design. According to Merriam (2009), a basic qualitative design is used when researchers want to examine “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). This proved to be an appropriate fit for the current study wherein the primary interest was to gather information from African American women educators about their experiences and how they interpret their experiences in navigating the “crooked room” of an educational setting. Additional information on the characteristics of the nature of this qualitative study are addressed below.

**Critical qualitative research.** The philosophical perspective used in this study was characteristic of *critical qualitative research* which “focuses on societal critique in



order to raise consciousness and empower people to bring about change” (Merriam, 2009, p.23). Kincheloe and McLaren (2003) captured the nature of critical research:

Whereas traditional researchers cling to the guard rail of neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world. Traditional researchers see their task as the description, interpretation, or reanimation of a slice of reality, whereas critical researchers often regard their work as a first step toward forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself (p. 453).

By employing critical research, I as the primary researcher, acknowledged the critical lens through which I conducted this study, noting that this research study did not attempt to present a neutral or objective position that is typically characteristic of traditional Eurocentric research that follows a quantitative or positivist approach. In addition to the critical nature of this research process, critical qualitative research is made distinct by asserting that “all research is merely an act of interpretation” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 443). Critical research theorists, recognizing that interpretation of data and qualitative research itself can be subjective and not neutral, require researchers to be self-conscious and aware of their own subjectivities, preconceived notions, and assumptions. In essence, critical researchers must be self-reflexive and make their biases transparent.

It was my intent to confront injustices by presenting informative stories of African American women educators. Therefore, for the specific purposes of this study, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as a theoretical framework. The history of the

development of CRT was presented in Chapter One along with a rationale for the relevance for this particular study. To reiterate, CRT is particularly relevant for exploring issues related to race in the field of education. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) defined critical race methodology as “a theoretically grounded approach to research that foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process” (p. 24). CRT provides a framework for understanding how power and privilege function in society and how they impact race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality (Bell, 1995). These considerations are directly applicable to this study which focused on critically examining the experiences of African American women educators. Malagon, Perez Huber, and Valez (2009) asserted the following on the fit of CRT as a methodology:

Centering CRT within the research process transforms the types of questions we ask, the types of methodologies we employ, the way we analyze data, and most importantly, the very purpose of our research. We argue that the very act of centering CRT in the research process serves to transform higher education by disrupting the dominant ideologies traditionally embedded in the knowledge production process (pp. 257-258).

The need for introducing voices from historically marginalized groups to research studies to act as a counter narrative to the dominant perspective has received attention from other CRT scholars as well. Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002) referred to this concept of relying on only the dominant perspective to inform research. They use the term “apartheid of knowledge” to refer to the tendency in research and academia wherein only certain types of knowledge and knowledge production are validated in higher

education in the U.S., thus serving to marginalize, distort, and erase the experiences of People of Color, particularly as sources of knowledge (Bernal Delgado & Villalpando, 2002). Similarly, Delgado (1984) used the term “imperial scholarship” to describe a trend wherein a single perspective, often that of an “elite” group of white males can define an entire field. Left unchallenged, Malagon, Perez Huber, and Velez (2009) pointed out the threat to informed educational research: “Recognizing how the apartheid of knowledge is constructed and perpetuated in academic research through imperial scholarship, the need for scholarship drawing from nontraditional sources of knowledge becomes clear” (p. 258). This statement captures the importance of conducting research, such as this study, that presents the previously disregarded voices of African American women.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) stated that critical race methodology “challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color” (p. 24). This study sought to consider the experiences of African American women educators in relation to these elements of race, gender, and class and the impact they have on their citizenship rights, roles, and responsibilities. The CRT methodology provided an appropriate framework as it gave space for exploration through challenging the traditional research designs and theories which have traditionally viewed persons of color through a deficit lens model. Additionally, CRT exposes and confronts the imbalance of power that exists in traditional models of social science research (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race theory becomes methodology through the intentional use of applying the CRT lens in data collection, interpretation, and analysis. This study used semi-structured interviews that

allowed participants to share their narratives. Additionally, counter-storytelling was a specific method used in this study to obtain the individual stories of African American women educators.

**Ethnography and autoethnography.** Recognizing that research is not neutral (Berg, 2009; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002), I employed autoethnography strategies as a self-reflective component of this study to be fully transparent in my interpretations of the data and interactions with participants.

Autoethnographic reflections were utilized in this study to provide another perspective on the data collected. To better understand the use of autoethnography in this study, a brief overview of the origin of ethnography is presented.

Ethnographic research, which originated in anthropology, is focused on human society and culture. Merriam (2009) referred to ethnography as both a process and a product referring to the fact that researchers can *do* an ethnography (as a study) and *produce* an ethnography (as a report). Berg (2009) described ethnography as a “process that attempts to describe and interpret social expressions between people and groups” (p. 191). A key component of conducting ethnographical research is producing “thick descriptions” of the cultures presented in the research studies. In these thick descriptions, particular attention is paid to as many aspects of interactions as possible—location, surroundings, tone of voice, gestures, positioning, and other forms of nonverbal communication to name a few.

Hughes et al., (2012) referred to autoethnography as “a form of critical self-study in which the researcher takes an active, scientific, and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the researcher as similar to the *self*

(i.e., us) or as *others* who differ from the self (i.e., them)” (p. 209). This is particularly applicable to the present study since I, as the researcher, identify as a woman and African American and presented critical reflections of my own personal experiences. As a result of having engaged in continual reflection, I reported on some of my experiences of being an African American school counselor in a predominantly white public school system as well as being the principal investigator in this study and interviewing other African American women educators.

Early studies using ethnography as a research method, placed importance on the researcher maintaining a certain “detachment” toward society and to be an observer of the participants (Vidich & Lyman, 2003). As Denzin and Lincoln (2003) pointed out, however, “the concept of the aloof observer has been abandoned” (p. 28). This notion of casting aside the air of aloofness fits with the proposed design of this research study which was critical and engaged the use of autoethnography. Additionally, Chavez (2012) rejected the idea of detachment of the researcher in her statement on her position as a researcher “from the onset, I acknowledge that my educational research does not ignore the premise that we are all in a relationship with existing social, political, and economic conditions that are structured hierarchically to one another” (p. 338). Following Chavez’s example, my intent was to be transparent that, while conducting research for this study, I did not employ the detached stance that is regarded as the only valid role of a researcher. Rather, data gathering methods used in this study reflected the personal nature of this work regarding my relationships with social and political structures.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the principal interviewer, it was important to disclose my identities and review how they may have impacted the research process. As indicated above, I have reflected on the fact that my identity as an African American woman who is a school counselor and principal interviewer of this study may have a direct or indirect impact on the process of collecting data. I remained keenly aware of my own experiences of being in a crooked room as an African American woman educator. As such, I was diligent in recognizing my experiences as related to and perhaps similar, yet separate from the experiences of other participants so as not to enmesh or overlap stories. Of particular consideration was the fact that I have previous professional relationships with some of the participants. In this sense, it was important to consider the likelihood of increased sharing based on familiarity as well as the possibility of decreased objectivity based on anticipating researcher's interests. Kincheloe and McLaren (2003) urged researchers to "become aware of the ideological imperatives and epistemological presuppositions that inform their research as well as their own subjective, intersubjective, and normative reference claims" (p. 453). I set out to increase my own awareness by continually reflecting upon the research process and my perspective in my field journal.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were determined based on purposeful sampling, wherein information rich cases are selected for detailed analysis (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) described purposeful sampling as being appropriate for research studies in which the researcher seeks to "discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). Three specific criteria were used to identify participants.

The first criterion was that participants had to self-identify as African American or Black women. The second criterion was that participants had to be currently working or have worked in majority white public school districts. For the purposes of this study, “majority white” was defined as a district wherein both the staff and student population is more than 60% white. Since this study focused on the distinct experiences of African Americans working in a setting in which they were in the minority, this was a key component of the selection process. A third criterion for this study was that the participants must be professional educators. For the purposes of this study, professional educators included, but were not limited to teachers, counselors, school social workers, and administrators. Support staff who worked in schools - secretaries, dietary aides, and custodians were not included the sample population. Though the work of support staff is critical to the functioning of schools, the focus of this study was not on this group. This distinction was made purposefully as research has found that African American educators are underrepresented in the professional education workforce (National Congress of Black Women, 2014).

Personal invitations were extended to prospective participants via person-to-person contact, phone, and email. The sample of African American women educators was comprised of participants who responded to the invitation requesting their participation in this study. Berg (2009) noted that in purposive sampling, “researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent this population” (p. 50). In serving as both researcher and a participant who identifies as an African American woman and educator, I have acquired personal and professional knowledge and experience of the research topic for this particular study.

Moreover, I had the advantage of having access since I worked in a school setting. In addition to initial invitations extended to participate in this study, snowball or network sampling was employed as well in an attempt to reach additional African American female educators. Merriam (2009) referred to snowball sampling as a strategy which involves identifying a few key participants who have meaningful insight or data to contribute to the study and then asking those participants to identify others who may fit the requirements of the study. Similarly, Berg (2009) noted that snowball sampling is beneficial when researchers need to locate participants with whose characteristics or attributes fit the parameters of the study.

I anticipated that between 12 and 15 participants would be involved in this study. This number of participants was projected based upon research surrounding the concept of saturation. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) referred to saturation as “the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data” (p. 59). Based on their study of saturation, it was concluded that data saturation occurred by the time the twelfth interview was analyzed. Additionally, they noted that after analyzing 12 interviews, code definitions were stable and any new information was discovered to be a variation of previous themes rather than a completely novel concept. I continued to identify and interview participants until the point of saturation was reached, which for this study turned out to be eight participants. An additional two participants were interviewed to ensure that saturation had been reached (Guest et al., 2006).

Pseudonyms, rather than real names, were used for all participants in this study in order to promote anonymity. Specific demographic information about participants was shared in non-identifiable manners. To ensure the highest possible degree of anonymity,



potential identifiers such as age, position, and years of experience were described in ranges or as a group, rather than shared about any specific participant. As the author of this study, I served as the researcher and as a participant. As a researcher I documented the experiences of the educators and as a participant I shared my own personal experiences as an African American woman educator working in a primarily white school setting. These accounts are shared in detail in Chapter Four: Results.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection in this study primarily came from semi-structured interviews, the author's autoethnographic reflections, and my fieldwork journal. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the University of Missouri- St. Louis prior to conducting participant interviews. The University IRB policy outlined that "review of Human Subjects Research is mandated by the National Research Act (PL 93-348) and implemented by Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46). The research of faculty, staff, and students requires review" ([www.umsl.edu/services/ora/Compliance/human-subjects-irb.html](http://www.umsl.edu/services/ora/Compliance/human-subjects-irb.html)).

Participants were invited to participate in the study by one of three modes of communication: face-to-face conversation, email, or phone. During this initial contact I introduced the topic of my research interest and allowed time for any questions the participant had regarding the nature of this study. Upon receiving notification that the potential participant was interested in participating in this study, I discussed with participants a convenient time and place for the interview to take place.

Participants were allowed to choose the location of the interviews. This intentional strategy was used in order to encourage optimal comfort and therefore

increase the likelihood of authentic sharing on the part of the participant. In particular, I anticipated that it would be important to conduct the interviews in a location other than participants' schools in an attempt to allow participants to feel they can speak freely without unintended consequences. In fact, all participants chose their location (their home, my home, or a public location) for interviewing and only one chose to be interviewed at their school setting.

During the first meeting with each participant, I reviewed the "Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities" (see Appendix A). After agreeing to the terms of the study, researcher and participants signed two consent forms—one was given to the participant and the other was kept in a secure location with other artifacts from this study. The consent form explained the expectations for the participant's role in the research. These expectations included the expected time commitment involved and addressed the possibility that time may flex to accommodate participant's storytelling. Participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and they could choose to withdraw at any time.

All interviews were audio recorded and duplicate copies were made in case of damage to the original audio file. All recordings were transcribed by the researcher which allowed for added familiarity with the interviews and content. Data were then hand-coded by the researcher and recorded in the fieldwork journal. Specific information on the coding process is presented in the Data Analysis section below.

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to optimize the exploration of the issues related to the research question with participants. The semi-structured interview questions that were asked of all participants are provided in Appendix B. During

interviews, I allowed for additional comments, follow up questions, and clarification as necessary. As anticipated, Critical Race Theory and CRT methodology utilized for this study influenced follow up questions that came up during participant interviews.

Specifically, there were instances during which I employed the critical research approach which does not hide behind the pretense of being “neutral” or “objective.” It was during those times that I listened for both spoken words and unspoken meaning and asked participants to clarify their meaning so as to not miss the participants’ intent.

Autoethnography techniques of self-reflection were utilized in this study as they have particular usefulness and relevance in the field of education. This form of self-study, with its significant applicability to cultural inquiry and social conscious thought held particular relevance to this study (Hughes et al, 2012). An added depth of perspective was brought to this study by my engaging in reflections of myself as I related to cultural conditions and reflection on my own practices and stance.

A fieldwork journal was kept to record the process and procedures of the research study. A fieldwork journal has been described as “an introspective record of the anthropologists experience in the field” (Merriam, 2003, p. 136). Merriam addressed the content of the fieldwork journal stating that it may include the researcher’s “ideas, fears, mistakes, confusion, and reactions to the experience and can include thoughts about the research methodology itself” (Merriam, 2003, p. 136). My fieldwork journal spanned the pre-proposal stage through the final submission of this study. Preliminary analyses and ponderings were recorded in this journal to provide a foundation for later reflection. The journal proved to be critically useful for presenting methodology. More on this is addressed in the section on Trustworthiness.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis, as defined by Merriam (2009) is “the process of making sense out of data” (p. 175). In this study, data analysis took place simultaneously with data collection. Merriam (2009) stated that the “much preferred way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection” (p. 171). I began the transcription and analysis as soon as possible after the end of each interview. The ongoing review of data served two important functions. First, it served the purpose of keeping data manageable as well – so mounds of interview data were not accumulated and left to be transcribed and reviewed all at once. Secondly, analyzing data while collecting it guided me in the research process. Transcribing interviews and reviewing notes continually allowed me to detect patterns as they began to emerge.

This study was framed in a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective and as such, the specific methodologies used reflected the CRT orientation. Data were analyzed using the processes and principles of grounded theory. The goal of grounded theory is that by the end of the qualitative study, there will be a particular theory that emerges from and is grounded in the data. Merriam (2009) noted that the theories that develop from grounded theory are not necessarily formal or grand scale theories. Rather, “substantive theory has as its referent specific, everyday-world situations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 30). Though it is not exclusively a CRT methodology, a grounded theory approach to data analysis was compatible with and fit into the CRT perspective that I maintained throughout this study. Malagano, Perez Huber, and Velez (2009) captured the unification of CRT and grounded

theory “as anti-racist, social justice scholars, we use the synergy between CRT and grounded theory in our research as we connect everyday life experiences of People of Color to systemic processes of oppression” (p. 263). Malagano et al. (2009) further insisted that “the researcher can utilize grounded methodology to interpret the perspectives and voices of the narratives that remain unacknowledged, invalidated, and distorted in social science research” (p. 259).

This study used a constant comparative method, a data analysis technique associated with grounded theory. Merriam (2009) regarded the constant comparative method as “comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences” (p. 30). During initial data analysis of interviews, open coding was used which allowed me to remain open to any patterns or themes that emerged in the data. I used this coding process to begin the constructing of categories. I openly coded data by initially flagging phrases, words, and concepts during the transcription process.

As the data analysis process continued, I moved into the phase of analytic coding where I continued to code data using interpretation and reflecting on meaning. Malagano et al. (2009) pointed out that “constructing analytic codes and categories from data advances theory development during each step of the process” (p. 261). This process of flagging data, reflecting on meaning, and interpretation was repeated throughout the data collection and analysis process until saturation was reached. During the analytic coding period, each interview was reviewed multiple times (each interview was reviewed fully no fewer than three times and in some cases five times or more) which allowed for increased familiarity with the data as well as all possible themes to be detected.

I personally transcribed each interview rather than hiring a professional transcriber in order to become as familiar with the data as possible. I followed the same process for each interview: during each interview, I jotted down notes and impressions. Upon completing an interview, I began the transcription process as soon thereafter as possible, which allowed me to keep the information fresh in my mind. After each interview was transcribed, I engaged in identifying main themes. After the first two interviews, I began this process concurrent with transcription as certain themes began to emerge and became very clear. After all interviews had been transcribed, I reviewed all themes again and began to construct major themes and categories using a coding chart to track themes as they related to participants' responses. Data from the field journal and researcher reflections were incorporated into these categories as well. Once these themes and categories were developed, I engaged in member checks with four participants from the study who confirmed the accuracy of the major themes presented in Chapter Four.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthy research can be described as being dependable and reliable. Several works have addressed the need to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research (Akkerman et al., 2008; Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Guba (1981) suggested that in order for qualitative research to be viewed as trustworthy, it must address the following aspects: "truth value," applicability, consistency, and neutrality. These specific aspects were addressed in this study and are outlined below.

**Truth Value, Internal Validity, and Credibility.** Guba (1981) used the term "truth value" to refer to validity or credibility. The issue of validity was addressed in this study in conjunction with the understanding that validity is relative and depends upon an

individual's understanding of their experiences—in this case how African American women educators interpret their experiences in their school settings. As Guba suggested, this study used “member checks” as means of testing credibility or “testing the data with members of the relevant human data source groups” (p. 80).

Participants were asked to verify the themes pulled from interviews as a means of checking for accuracy of intended messages. Four participants (Sally, Susan, Chantelle, and Rhonda) participated in member checks to confirm that the themes accurately reflected their meanings. During member checks, participants shared their understanding of the researcher's interpretation. All participants who engaged in member checks agreed with the presented themes. Susan noted that her experiences did not align with the experiences of others, but acknowledged that overall themes were accurate. Sally contacted me to share additional reflections that she had after the initial interview. Both of these checks still indicated that the themes that emerged were consistent with data.

**Applicability, External Validity, and Generalizability.** Guba (1981) used this term synonymously with generalizability or external validity to address the concern that qualitative research may not be generalizable. The purpose of this study was not to uncover generalizable understandings, but to present the specific experiences that the participants have had and how those experiences and understandings will help inform literature on school counseling consultation practices. To this end, Guba's naturalist perspective of transferability was used in this study: “The naturalist does not attempt to form generalizations that will hold in all times and in all places, but to form working hypotheses that may be transferred from one context to another depending upon the degree of “fit” between the contexts” (p. 81) Further rationale for looking beyond

external validity was provided by Malagano et al. (2009) who asserted the following: “because CRT is committed to illuminating the experiences of those who are marginalized, there is less concern with both the external validity required by traditional research methodologies and the ability to generalize the study’s findings beyond the immediate study” (p. 261). The idea of rejecting a qualitative study based on the argument that it lacks external validity is viewed as an example of systemic process of oppression within research.

**Consistency and Reliability.** Merriam (2009) referred to reliability as “the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (p. 220). Guba (1981) pointed to multiple realities, potential error from using humans as instruments and “evolving insights and sensitivities” as reasons to tolerate some degree of instability in results (p. 81). In other words, due to the large component of human involvement and subsequently potential human error that is characteristic of qualitative studies, the focus for this study was not on replicating results on the same scale as within a traditional experimental research protocol which exercises strict control over measures. Rather for the purposes of this study, reliability was addressed by verifying that the results are consistent with the data collected. Merriam (2009) pointed out that human behavior is dynamic, not static and posits that a more applicable question should be “not whether findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 221). Guba (1981) stated “the naturalist thus interprets consistency as dependability” (p. 81). To this end, the focus was on consistency of results and specific steps were taken that demonstrated that the results make sense considering the data collected as outlined above.



**Neutrality and Objectivity.** I have asserted previously that this research study does not aim to be viewed through the detached, impersonal lens of traditional research methods. As outlined in the Research Design section of this chapter, CRT incites a certain level of personal engagement in research and discourse. Guba's (1981) perspective of focusing on the confirmability of research, rather than requiring the "certifiability of the investigator or his or her research" was employed in this study. As such, I engaged in self-reflective practices throughout this study, and made researcher biases known. In addition to being self-aware and reflective while conducting interviews, I continued to be mindful of my bias during the data analysis phase of this study. As I used open coding, I was conscious of my own position and bias and, therefore, was able to be attentive of how my experiences could have influenced interpretations of participant responses. Understanding that research is not a neutral process, I sought to be transparent in how my own experiences as an African American woman and educator might have influenced the interview process, coding, or analysis of data. Conducting member checks with participants allowed me to make sure that themes related to data were certifiable.

Additionally, trustworthiness was addressed by employing data triangulation. Berg (2009) referred to triangulation as "combining several lines of sight" with the goal of obtaining "a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements" (p. 5). Triangulation strategies that were employed in this study included the following: 1) coded results were shared with participants as a means to follow up with participants to verify that their responses are accurately shared and 2) the researcher's

autoethnographic reflections and field work journals were presented as another perspective.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In full disclosure to participants, I identified myself as a student in a doctoral program at a Midwestern university, seeking to gather and share the experiences of African American women educators who work in majority white public school settings. All participants were given a comprehensive description of the study that included specific procedures and intention of how the data will be used to add to the understanding of the experiences of African American women educators and how that in turn may inform future professional practices of school counselors. Participants were informed at the onset of being contacted for participation in the study that their involvement was voluntary and they had the right to discontinue their participation at any time. Participants were informed about the intent of the research and the purpose of the study and allowed to ask clarifying questions about their participation.

Specific steps to increase participant privacy were enacted: potentially identifying information was masked, all electronic field notes and interview data were kept in a secure, confidential file that was password-protected; and handwritten notes were kept in a secure location.

Though little risk was expected to be involved for participants, it was shared as part of the IRB consent protocol that there might be a risk for potential uncomfortable feelings that might come from answering certain questions regarding their experiences of

being African American women working in majority white schools. Additionally, given the sensitive nature of this research topic, I explained the efforts I took to increase participants' privacy such as use of pseudonyms and removing potentially identifying information. I anticipated that this may be of concern to some participants given that the number of African American women working as professional educators is somewhat limited in the location of the study.

Sincere attempts at anonymity were made in order to encourage participants to speak candidly about their experiences without fear of consequences or retaliation. Participants were asked to fully read the consent form and were given time to ask clarifying questions.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I explained the methods utilized for answering the following research questions: How do African American women educators experience being in a crooked room? How are African American women impacted by their reality in navigating both formal and informal roles within school systems? How do African American women educators successfully navigate their work in the public school system? A rationale was given for conducting a qualitative research study, as well as explanation of the research design and the use of critical race methodology. Specific information was provided on role of the researcher and participants, and detailed steps regarding data collection and data analysis. Finally, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and study limitations were addressed. Detailed findings and interpretations are presented Chapter Four and Chapter Five.

## Chapter Four

### Results

Research has shown that African American women educators face unique challenges and have distinctive experiences that may impact their roles, responsibilities, and interactions with others (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Mabokela & Madsen, 2007; Patton & Catching, 2009; Revere, 1986). There is, however, a dearth of information in educational literature that considers the perspectives of African American women educators working in predominantly white school settings. The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of African American women educators. In this study, specific attention was paid to the accounts of African American women educators and their understandings of being in a *crooked room* (Harris-Perry, 2011), experiencing double consciousness, and the implications thereof on their citizenship, recognition, and relationships within their school culture. The following research questions informed this study:

1. How do African American women educators experience being in a crooked room?
2. How are African American women impacted by navigating both formal and informal roles within school systems?
3. How do African American women educators successfully navigate their work in the public school system?

This chapter presents the results, including themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews of 10 participants. Participants shared their experiences of working in a predominantly white school setting, including their perspectives on the impact of race

relations in their school districts. The research findings reported in this chapter are based on the analysis of the following data sources: semi-structured interviews as well as the researcher's field journal and observations. Additional reflections from the researcher are presented in Chapter Five: Discussion.

### **Participants**

As described in the previous chapter, all 10 participants for this study self-identified as either Black or African American women ranging in age from early 30s to early 50s. All participants were fully certified educators in their particular content area. The women who participated in this study were employed as school administrators, counselors, or teachers at the time of their interview. Their years of experience in working in public education ranged from 5 to 25 years. Specific demographic information was purposefully omitted in an effort to protect the confidentiality of participants. Pseudonyms were used to further protect participants' identities.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview segment of data collection spanned a five month time period from the first interview to the last interview. Data analysis began immediately after the first interview was conducted. During the initial transcription of the first interview, I began the open coding process by remaining open to identifying any piece of data that may be relevant to the study. As subsequent interviews were conducted, the transcription and open coding process followed. Analytical coding followed the open coding process.

Analytical coding was employed following the first few interviews as categories began to emerge. During the analytical coding phase, categories were refined and related to one another. A Critical Race Theory (CRT) approach to data analysis was

intentionally engaged by utilizing grounded theory to “interpret the perspectives and voices of the narratives that remain unacknowledged, invalidated and distorted in social science” (Malagano, 2009, p. 259). During this stage of data analysis, I reflected on the narratives and searched for interpretation and meaning. Finally, during the selective coding phase, categories were solidified and participant transcripts were again reviewed to detect any further supporting details. By the end of the eighth interview, saturation had been reached in terms of themes, or broad categories being shared by participants. Although individual stories provided unique details, several prominent themes began to emerge and no new theme or categories were revealed after conducting interviews with eight participants. After reaching a point of saturation, two further interviews were conducted with two additional participants to ensure that no new themes might be uncovered.

Four major themes emerged as a result of engaging in the coding process: 1) *Encounters with racism*: African American women educators encounter expressions of racism in their schools; 2) *Racial acrobatics*: African American women adjust their behavior to fit within their school environments; 3) *Barriers*: African American women face additional barriers when gaining access to and navigating their roles in predominantly white schools; 4) *Keep your eyes on the prize*: African American women educators possess skills and traits that promote success.

In reflecting on the organization of this chapter and these results, it is important for readers to note that social science research is often interconnected and overlapping and, therefore, does not always fit neatly into one precise category. Although broad categories were created to share results in as organized a manner as possible, it is noted

that there are connections that run through each category. Roberts (2010) suggested using research questions to “clearly discuss your findings and to maintain consistency among chapters” (p. 174). Therefore, results are presented in detail below and organized as they refer to corresponding research questions.

### **Themes Related to Research Question One: How do African American Women Educators Experience Being in a Crooked Room?**

The corresponding overarching theme related to this research question was:

*African American women educators encountered expressions of racism in their schools.*

Two supporting subthemes were identified by participants as well: *Being compared with racial stereotypes* and *being subjected to microaggressions*. Specific participant responses are presented below as they explained, described, and related to the shared experiences of African American women educators’ involvement in the crooked rooms of predominantly white schools.

**African American women educators encounter expressions of racism in their schools.** The concept of the crooked room was presented in detail in Chapter Two and the concept is offered again here for review. In essence, being in a crooked room disorients those within the room when they are bombarded with slanted images. Specific to this study, the idea of the crooked room was expressed through stereotypes and misaligned expectations placed on Black women. The misrecognition caused by slanted images is represented within this study as participants discussed their encounters with stereotypes. Misaligned expectations are presented later in this section through accounts and specific examples of various types of microaggressions they incurred in the crooked rooms of their schools.

*Being compared with racial stereotypes.* An inability to be seen and recognized as a person of worth can have negative ramifications on an individual. Harris-Perry (2011) validated this in her writing: “Craving recognition of one’s special, in-exchangeable uniqueness is part of the human condition” (p. 38). Harris-Perry addressed the problem of misrecognition as it relates in particular to African American women: “These citizens face fundamental and continuing threats to their opportunity for accurate recognition. Individuals denied access to the public realm or whose group membership limits their social possibilities cannot be accurately recognized” (p. 38). In other words, African American women, as part of a being in a marginalized group, are challenged by having their individual uniqueness appreciated. Participants in this study shared their experiences of facing misrecognition in their professional settings as portrayed through the use of stereotypes.

*Mammy.* As outlined in Chapter Two, the mammy archetype, characterized as the “faithful, obedient domestic servant” (Collins, 2009, p. 10), is steeped in racist ideology. In some instances, participants were confronted with depictions of stereotypes by their coworkers. Chantelle reported her experience with a coworker sharing a story from her childhood not as a means to offend, but erroneously believing that story would build relationship with Chantelle:

[It was like she was] trying to force a relationship with me by telling me about her black nanny that she had growing up... how close she was to her—like she was her mom. And I’m like, is she really telling me this mammy story? And of course I had to sit there and be professional ‘cause



we're at work! I wanted to ask her – how in the hell are you talking to me about your mammy!?! How could I ever identify with that?

The above interaction demonstrated her colleague's deep misunderstanding of African American women by the coworker. Chantelle's coworker lacked the cultural sensitivity to understand that sharing a story of her African American nanny would not serve well as a point of bonding with Chantelle, but rather created further distance. The coworker's inability or unwillingness to consider the cultural implications of relating Chantelle to her nanny can be interpreted as merely negligent or outright hostile. Regardless of the intent, the outcome of being subjected to her coworker's oppressive perspective was that Chantelle was exposed to psychological harm in her workplace.

In another situation, Chantelle was called mammy by a student. Though it was done in what the student believed to be a loving manner, this nonetheless, represents an example of misrecognition. Being compared or referred to as a mammy subjects African American women to psychological harm via a hostile work environment.

Being seen as mammy holds deeper, professionally harmful implications beyond the discomfort the target receives in moments of comparison or story-telling. In relating the danger of the mammy stereotype, Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) found that Black women who were perceived to fit the mammy stereotype were less likely to be promoted to more prestigious positions. Along these lines, participants reported that they believed the perceptions of how others—specifically administrators and evaluators—viewed them as being capable only of operating in the role of nurturer or caretaker negatively impacted their opportunities for promotion. As Chantelle put it:

It's okay for me to be the mammy of these students. ...But it's not okay for me to call the shots. It's okay for me to call the shots from behind the scenes and getting everything done without the title or the money.

Chantelle viewed this predicament of being charged with the caretaking of students as eventually leading into her exploitation.

... I feel used sometimes and exploited. I really didn't want to say that! I really wanted to believe that wasn't the truth. I'm having a hard time that I have all these certifications, all these credentials. I have written articles. I have worked with a variety of educators from elementary, middle, and high school. People in St. Louis, people all over the country. And I can't get an assistant principal's job because somebody will be "more qualified" than me, but they haven't done half the things that I've done. ...

Chantelle's concerns of being exploited continued into the current school year:

They even wanted me, this school year, to run a blog and teachers can send me questions and all this stuff about this thing that I started. And I said in the conversation, "that would be great!" And never once did they say they were going to pay me or give me an extra duty contract. ...they'll bring somebody else in and pay them a lot of money to do something like that or to coach teachers or train them on something. But they want me to do it for free. So that's why I say I'm getting exploited. I didn't want to accept that because I have a good job.

Being seen as a caregiver is not necessarily a negative trait in itself. This becomes problematic, however, when being seen as a caregiver becomes the primary

responsibility of African American women educators and thereby interferes with other responsibilities and opportunities.

*Angry black woman.* Portrayal of African American women through the stereotype of an angry black woman serves to discredit and pathologize black women who express the normal human emotion of anger (Harris-Perry, 2011). Participants shared their experiences with not being able to fully express themselves for fear of being criticized or being invalidated by being labeled as an irate, angry black woman. Participants shared their stories of masking their anger, even when it was warranted in a given situation.

As Carol pointed out, stereotypes are a powerful motivator for adjusting one's own behavior:

I think sometimes when people are looking just at the outside package, their preconceived notions may play into things. I'm always very cognizant—I think I'm overly conscientious about my reactions to things. I'll try to give you an example. Even if I try to find something troublesome or bothersome to me, I try to make sure I don't come across as angry Black woman. ... I want to be validated without—I don't want people to be afraid of me. But I don't feel like I shouldn't be able to express how I feel about things. But I'm very mindful of – like I don't let my voice get too elevated. Or, I try not to come across as too harsh. Even when I'm interacting with the kids, I try to be firm and still sounding gentle. It's tiring sometimes to have to constantly think like that!

Carol was not alone in her frustrations of experiencing being in a crooked room built from the restrictive expectations of others. Kara reflected on the differences between working in her previous predominantly African American school district and her current school and recalled how she adjusted her own approach to addressing student behavior to avoid aligning with a stereotype:

And here it [the expectation] is: ‘You need to smile more! You need to be nice and warm.’ And there’s that line between being nice and being weak. I also feel like subconsciously, if I stop somebody, I don’t want to come across like Medea in a bad Tyler Perry movie! But I feel like if I do that, then it’s “OH! Angry black woman!” Versus—just do what your teacher tells you. I tell my kids: I don’t scream, I don’t yell, I’m not going to raise my voice. But you know my expectations. If you don’t meet them, you’re out.

Both Carol and Kara experienced trying to adjust their own behavior to avoid the perception and judgment of others as seeing them as acting in a stereotypical, negative manner. These accounts demonstrated the power of stereotypes to dictate behavior.

Chantelle’s experiences of being viewed as an angry Black woman persisted even when she tried to manage her reactions. Chantelle reported that her coworkers expect her to handle things like an angry black woman. She reported that even if she did not respond in a manner that could be viewed as her being the angry black woman, her coworkers might have still perceived that she is the angry black woman.

They would like to see me as that. If ever anything happens, they put it in there like I got ‘ghetto’ with them. They don’t expect that I’m going to

handle something calmly. And then even when I do, they try to paint a picture like I didn't handle it calmly. "She didn't say anything! She must be mad!" Did I say I was mad? I find myself saying that sometimes: 'I didn't say anything. I'm processing...' If I'm really pondering something, why can't I have a thinking face? Why is that a threat to you?

The implication of this exchange between Chantelle and her coworkers demonstrated how unfair expectations (specifically, the expectation that Chantelle will act as the angry black woman) pose another challenge for African American women to exist in a crooked room. Chantelle was essentially rendered unable to express her feelings in a safe manner, even if anger is warranted. If she expressed anger then she is in fact viewed as being the angry black woman and the white coworkers may feel justified in continuing their perpetuation of this stereotype: i.e. she is angry, therefore the stereotype must be true. Alternately, Chantelle may choose to hide her true reaction for fear of being judged and viewed negatively, and sacrifice her right to self-expression. Either outcome leaves something to be desired, further proving the challenge for African American women having to figure out which way is up in a crooked room.

Sally relayed a similar experience of coworkers trying to portray her as an angry Black woman as she talked about her interactions with a colleague as they discussed student behavior.

I was working with a student and he was having trouble in another class.

A lot of time kids of all different backgrounds would come to me and want to vent about what's going on in another classroom. That's fine.

Sometimes I would give them advice on how to move forward and not

continue to get in trouble. Sometimes I wouldn't and I would just listen. But ...the teacher noticed that we were having conversation. I was done talking to him and she came over and was really upset about how he would listen to me, but wouldn't listen to her. And she made the comment that it must be because I would get all up in his face. ...It's that common stereotype about black women and how they ... How they interact with kids. I guess... As a black female teacher—this is how you discipline students. You get all up in their faces, you yell at them. You poppin' your neck—or whatever the case... I had never done that before! She had never seen me interact with any kid in that way... but, that was her assumption.

Sally's experience of being in a crooked room involved her colleague's erroneous expectation that the Sally was only able to obtain desired behavior from her students because she acted as an angry black woman.

*Superwoman.* Sometimes referred to as, The Strong Black Woman, the myth of the superwoman is not necessarily recognized immediately as a negative stereotype; however, the pressure to perform at high levels assuredly oppresses African American women educators. Harris-Perry (2011) stripped away the shiny packaging of the Strong Black Woman and uncovered how this image is rooted in misrecognition.

I will offer a theory of how the strong black woman came to function as a racial and citizenship imperative for black women. I believe that the construct of the strong black woman does not arise from empirical observation of who black women actually are. Instead it is a racial and

political construct emanating from the expectations of African American communities and from the needs of the nation that frame black women in very narrow ways. In the language of political theorists, the strong black woman myth is a misrecognition of African American women. But it creates specific expectations for their behavior within the American polity.

(p. 21)

Harris-Perry challenged the idea that the superwoman is a character that African American women should strive to achieve to emulate. “The idea that black women are supposed to be super-strong and invulnerable is a similar psychological distortion, which encourages black women to believe that persistent racial and gender inequality is deserved” (p. 189).

This concept of the superwoman was shared in this section as several participants cited this as a major issue they face in their schools. In three of the 10 interviews, this was expressed specifically by participants’ responses to administrators placing unrealistic expectations on them as new teachers.

Chantelle recalled several interactions in her first year of teaching that demonstrated that she was expected to know how to expertly handle difficult student issues. Though it is good to have high expectations, unreasonably high expectations without proper supports can feel overwhelming. Chantelle expressed her exasperation with this when she was asked by a veteran teacher how she should be addressing the achievement gap. To which Chantelle replied: “I don’t know I’ve only been here two weeks! ...I wasn’t given the opportunity to be a new teacher. I was supposed to come in and solve this problem that’s been going on for 15 years!” Chantelle went on to share an

experience of students with challenging behavior issues being disproportionately placed in her class rather than in other classes with fewer students.

Sarah also shared her experience of being a brand new teacher and being expected to perform as though she had been teaching for decades:

When I first came, I was given initially what they called the harder black students. Because they thought that since I was African American I could solve all the problems with the black kids by making those connections. And so initially that threw me—that all the more difficult ones were placed in my room because they automatically thought I the connections would be made and I could solve all the world's problems. I was 23. I was a novice. I was straight out of college. Some of the other seasoned teachers probably had more experienced dealing with behavior problems than I did. But I still had that challenge before me.

Gianna shared her account of being a first year teacher which had some of the same elements of being overworked as Chantelle and Sarah. Gianna, however, reported that she had a different response to the tasks she was given.

I have to remind people that I'm a first year teacher, but they don't look at me as a first year teacher at all. But the reason that it didn't bother me is because I had so many resources before I got this position that if I really, really, really needed something, I could just go ask and get it. In terms of people holding my hand and all that stuff—none of that. None of that. But that's okay because I don't want my hand to be held. I want to jump into the pool and float to the bottom and push my way to the top! That's



what I want to do. ... Because the only competition you have is yourself. If you can't beat yourself you can't beat anybody else really. But I enjoy the challenge of challenging myself. I'm a self-starter. I'll go workout on my own. I don't really need anybody to—I mean it's great to have somebody, have a partner. It's very, very helpful in keeping you focused and keeping you motivated. But I can start it.

Gianna's account demonstrated the external pressures of trying to meet the superwoman myth. In addition, Gianna has internalized the high demand and strives to meet and exceed all expectations. True to the insidious nature of the superwoman stereotype, trying to function as a Superwoman has negative implications, as evidenced by Gianna's final statement: "sometimes I get tired."

Finally, Lisa also spoke to the tribulations of being expected to deal with students who had especially challenging behavior problems. Lisa shared her experiences of working in a school that routinely assigned students with behavior problems to the few African American teachers. When asked if she thought the reason was based upon racial stereotypes, Lisa replied affirmatively, "that is race." Lisa reflected on why the pattern of her being assigned to teach students with behavior concerns:

...I think that one of the reasons why I get them is a valid reason. I had to learn how to be that teacher. I wasn't always that teacher. ...I had to learn how to do that. It's not innate. It's not because I'm brown. And of course, if it is a tough brown kid, I'm getting them. I already know.

Lisa summarized this experience succinctly; though she clearly is capable of working with students who have behavioral challenges, "...sometimes it burns you out."

Christina's experiences associated with the superwoman stereotype played out in an interaction involving perceived disrespect from her principal that left her feeling as though she was unable to express her emotions, lest they be construed as a sign of weakness.

And still hold my head up high and still say, "I understand you don't like what I'm saying to you. I understand you don't like what I'm presenting to you, but this is what our district says, so this is what I have to—this is what we have to do." And never once bow my head or cry in front of these people!

These portrayals of facing stereotypes shared by participants clearly exhibited Harris-Perry's (2011) sentiment regarding the crooked room: "It can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room" (p. 29).

***Being subjected to microaggressions.*** The use of microaggressions contributed to the construction of crooked rooms for participants. Participants in this study encountered microaggressions on a fairly regular basis. Microaggressions were particularly important to consider and are discussed openly below due to their insidious nature. They are often minimized, but the impact on the recipient can be deeply damaging. Sue (2013) presented three specific types of microaggressions, which are presented below with participant experiences that exemplified each microaggression.

***Microassaults: Sticks and stones, et cetera.*** Microassaults are explicit verbal or nonverbal attacks that are meant to convey bias and discrimination (Sue, 2013). When microassaults take place, there is no need to guess the intent of the perpetrator—the act of aggression was meant to cause hurt and harm to the recipient. Sarah recalled one such

interaction from her early experiences in working in a predominantly white school district.

So I was at an elementary school and they weren't accustomed to having Black people [as teachers]. So I was called the N-Word a few times by students. It was brought to my principal's attention and she thought it was no big issue. That I was taking it too much to heart. That they were just children.

In Sarah's case, she was exposed to two different layers of discrimination: the first was being called a derogatory name by her students—this offense is obvious and for most people it would be easy to understand her displeasure and outrage at the situation. The second layer of discrimination that Sarah experienced in this situation is the lack of support from her principal who essentially told Sarah she was making too big a deal of being verbally attacked.

*Microinsults: Did that really just happen?* Sue (2013) explained microinsults as “unintentional behaviors or verbal comments that convey rudeness or insensitivity or demean a person's racial heritage...” (p. 155). Microinsults are often subtle and leave the recipient questioning the exchange; often recipients of microinsults are unsure of how to explain what happened or if anything measurable did happen. As Lisa put it:

[There is a desire to] not put everything back on race. ...I try to find another reason for it. 'Cause I don't want to spend all my life worried about whether it happened because I was Black or whether it just happened. I want to let it go.

Participants reported various accounts of microinsults as part of their experience in working in a predominantly white school.

Sally recounted her experiences with being questioned by her white peers about her ability to make purchases:

I took my tax return money and I bought a TV. I shared that with my colleagues about how excited I was. And that was when flat screen TVs were just coming out and they were super expensive... I shared that exciting experience with them. And one teacher said—she made the comment—to another teacher, not even to me, “Well, how can she afford that?” People would always make comments about things. Material things that I had. And not like clothes, or anything like that. But, how can I afford a TV or how can I afford the car that I was driving? Little things like that—that to me have racial undertones. Because—why wouldn’t I be able? I work every day. Why wouldn’t I be able to pay for a car?

In yet another example, Sally shared her experiences in telling her colleagues about buying her first home:

I got questions from one person: “Well, how can you afford your house?” Again, “I work every day” is what I’m thinking in my mind. Over time I just... over time of having to have these strange conversations with people... I just told her I bought it with Monopoly money.

This microinsult directed at Sally conveyed the hidden message that as a Black woman, it was expected that she would not have the means to make expensive purchases such as a television or a nice car. By questioning or showing surprise at her ability to

afford these items, Sally's white colleagues indicated that their underlying bias is that Black people are poor and unable to afford amenities. Sally's derisive comment stemmed from frustration with being subjected to continual comments meant to denigrate her.

*Microinvalidations: No offense, but...* Microinvalidations are "verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of the target group" (Sue, 2013, p. 155). In sharing her experience with interviewing for a job, Rhonda encountered both microinvalidations and microinsults in the same interaction.

When I was looking to move to [this area], I had an interview at [names area school district]. I had applied there and I got a call from the principal and he said—he was asking about my qualifications. He said, "We think we may know who we want to hire, but we want to interview you anyway." I was like, 'okay...?' So, I went in for the interview. ...

And so he called me a couple days later and he was like, "We were actually really surprised. I didn't think your interview was going to go that well. And you actually almost made us change our minds about who we wanted to go with." He was like, "I'm just so surprised and I didn't think you knew all that." ...

I don't know. I mean, I try to take it as a compliment because you just want to see the best in things. But um, I don't think he understood what exactly he was saying. But I took the fact that I almost made them change their minds as a compliment. But I was like, 'what were you expecting when I came in there?'

Rhonda's account exhibited the difficulty in dealing with interactions in which a microinvalidation occurs—the perpetrator often does not even understand that he has done anything wrong. Presumably, in this instance, the principal may have believed that he was giving Rhonda a compliment. By showing his surprise at her level of intelligence, he actually, however, communicated his bias that he expected Rhonda to be incapable of fulfilling the position for which she had applied.

Chantelle encountered a microinvalidation from peers when they called into question how and why she was hired.

'You got this job because you're Black.' People said that to my face: 'Oh we know why they hired you.' And I would say, 'why?' (Co-workers): 'Oh, because we have a whole lot of Black kids at this school.' (C): 'Oh, what does that mean? What am I supposed to do with the children?' (Co-workers): 'Oh, I don't know, but we're pretty sure that's why you got the job.' (C:) 'Well, I got offered a job at the other school too. And they have black kids too.' It just sounded so stupid but these were real conversations.

During the interview, Chantelle laughed as she recalled the interaction with her coworkers. The seriousness of the situation becomes evident, however, when considering the potential harm endured to African American women who are subjected to other teachers and educators who hold this mindset.

**Themes Related to Research Question Two: How are African American Women Impacted by Navigating Both Formal and Informal Roles within School Systems?**

**African American women adjust their behavior to fit within their school environments.** Although all participants expressed some level of satisfaction with their current work and were able to identify some aspect of their work that they found fulfilling, each participant also voiced various concerns about the challenging aspects of their work as well. Sally's account of her experiences of working in a predominantly white school conveyed those opposite ends of the spectrum: "tumultuous at times... and very, very rewarding at times." Common themes related to an awareness of being treated differently than their white colleagues were identified within all participant responses. These differences were expressed through three different subthemes: having to work twice as hard, adjusting their behavior by playing the game, and feeling as though one is under a microscope or on stage. All of these may result in having a limited opportunity for self-expression.

***Working twice as hard.*** Participants shared their experiences of having to work "twice as hard" as their white co-workers and still receiving less recognition (in terms of pay, appreciation, and opportunities for leadership which can translate into opportunities for promotion). Sarah reflected on her experience of working in her current school district and the disparities that she feels:

It's been heart breaking... because I look at some of my other colleagues who I don't believe work as hard as the other African Americans in our district. They don't have to prove themselves every time they walk through the door. ...I'm tired of walking into this building having to prove myself to someone who doesn't even put in a tenth of the labor [that I do].

Echoing similar beliefs that African American women have to work twice as hard as their white peers, Lisa shared a comment made to her by a friend: “ ‘Sounds like you’re hunting a bunny with a bear rifle.’ ... [Yes],that’s pretty much what has to happen. If you want to be in high demand school districts, then you have to come with your bear rifle.” In this colorful statement, Lisa exemplified a common understanding that many African American women educators hold. In order to be successful in a predominantly white school district, African American women must possess credentials above and beyond those of their white peers holding similar positions.

Christina held the same understanding of having an inequitable workload as compared to white colleagues. “I’ve always felt like I have to work twice as hard to get the same respect or credit that my colleagues did.”

*Playing the game.* Almost all of the women reflected on how they felt they racial differences and being in the minority limited how they could express themselves in their workplaces. Adjusting their behavior by playing the game to fit within white spaces emerged as a theme to mitigate the negative feelings that arose in these places.

Sarah discussed her false self that she presented as a protective layer between herself and colleagues:

Everybody always seemed so happy all the time. In the Black culture— it’s okay to say “I had a hard day.” To let it out. ...I’ve been in Black schools and I’ve been in white schools. It was okay to say “Look, I’m tired! ...I had a rough night!” But here, I think it was like {falsely upbeat} “Okay everybody!” Pretending that the rough night wasn’t there. Pretending like my life was separate. Pretending that the things that I



carried with me were not going on. And putting on this fake—“I’m okay with everything! ...And I’m not really concerned about anything. I’m okay with the fact that you called me the N-word today! I will be okay!” No. I’m not okay with that.

Sarah’s frustration was almost palpable as she shared her experiences of having to pretend as though everything is fine when she has faced detestable injustices. Yet, she expresses an understanding that if she were not to act in this manner and adjust her behavior, the outcomes would be more harmful. In light of Sarah’s account, it is important to address the relationship between professional behavior and racial bias.

While it is expected of any professional working in an educational setting to maintain a certain level of decorum—as exhibited by Sarah—it is imperative to understand that the stakes are higher for African American women. African American women educators in this study reported feeling that, due to their racial and gender status, they were less likely to get a break for having a bad day and were more likely to be penalized for making mistakes. In other words, white counterparts may experience struggles with maintaining professional behavior 100% of the time and may be pardoned, whereas African American women may feel lasting judgment if their work place behavior is perceived as anything less than perfect.

Lisa talked of learning from an early age that her voice had little or no value in certain settings. “I learned to censor myself from the beginning...” Lisa shared how she viewed this societal need for African American women to change their behavior as it relates to her current professional setting:

It's what's expected of us. It's the way it's always been... We cross the street because the little old lady is looking at us like we're going to steal her purse. It makes her more comfortable. ...I think over time we've learned to make ourselves a little bit smaller so they feel comfortable. ...It's just who we are... I keep quiet in meetings when I have stuff to say...

In these examples of seeing how African American women adjusted their behavior to fit their work environments, it is evident that they had to give up part of their right of self-expression.

*Living under a microscope and living on stage.* Participants reflected on their incidents of feeling like all their actions were being magnified under a microscope and shared their reactions to the scrutiny that followed. Similarly to feeling like all their actions were judged, participants expressed acute awareness that their minority status in their schools made them feel at times as though they were under the spotlight. Hypervisibility as related to the experiences of African American women has been previously explored. Harris-Perry (2011) stated, "As members of a stigmatized group, African American women lack opportunities for accurate, affirming recognition of the self and yet must contend with hypervisibility imposed by their lower social status" (p. 39). Similarly, Mabokela and Madsen (2007) conducted a study of African American male and female educators working in desegregated suburban schools and found that participants reported feeling as though they were highly visible, overly dissected, and expected to fill stereotypical roles. Participants in this study shared their experiences of feeling hyper visible in their predominantly white schools.

Lisa shared a perspective of being constantly watched and knowing that she would likely incur judgment as well. “[A]ll your faults will be examined under a microscope.” African American women who are one of few persons of color or in some cases, the only person of color in their school buildings, are aware that they are highly visible and stand out for being different.

Carol reflected on her experiences of “being the only one” in predominantly white settings such as district meetings and notes how, consequently, it affected her behavior. Similarly, Chantelle reflected on her awareness of being hyper visible. “I need to always be cognizant of what I say—how does that make me look?” In this statement, Chantelle addressed not only the awareness of hypervisibility, but also double consciousness as she tried to see herself through the eyes of others.

Chantelle acknowledged that her awareness of hypervisibility paired with double consciousness impacted her behavior:

I don't go out with them social (white males/administrators) even though I could go and I know that's when networking happens. Because everything I do – they're watching. What I drink, what I order, how I eat. How I interact with the waitress. What I am wearing. What time I'm leaving. If I'm too about my kids that's an issue. If I don't show pictures about my kids that's an issue! Every single thing I do is scrutinized. In the building and in the district.

Chantelle's frustration with the seemingly impossible task of managing her hypervisibility and still meeting expectations of other was understandable as she attempted to navigate her environments.

Sally had a unique understanding of seeking balance between hypervisibility and being invisible: "...you have to engage – that's important. Or you're not really there. It's too easy to become invisible if you don't say anything. So, there's a pressure to say [some]thing." Sally expressed here the challenging task faced by many African American women as they try to seem personable, yet try to maintain their own privacy. As Harris-Perry (2011) stated: "This situation undermines the intersecting needs for privacy and recognition" (p. 39).

Christina reflected on the toll that it takes to be a Black woman in a sea of faces that do not look like hers:

You know, it takes a lot of thought to make sure every word you say sounds the way it's supposed to sound. There's a lot of energy going into going to work every day. That you look the right way, you sound the right way. That you wore the right thing. Because you know—a lot of people can get away with a lot of things, but not you. So, I'm exhausted at the end of the day... You get to make mistakes, but you don't get to make certain mistakes that other people probably get forgiven for.

Christina's sentiments echoed those expressed by other participants. When you are one of few people who look like you do, eyes are more frequently turned your way. Unfortunately, these eyes are not always friendly or supportive. Or, as more simply stated by Kara: "I think I feel a little bit more guarded because I feel more watched."

**African American women face additional barriers when gaining access to and navigating their roles in predominantly white schools.** Participants noted that there are separate realms in which they operate in formal and informal roles. Encounters

are presented below to demonstrate the challenges and successes in gaining access within predominantly white schools.

*Navigating Formal Roles.* African American women educators reported their stories of gaining access to employment and recounted the experiences they had as a result of their intersection of race and gender. Formal roles regarding *Hiring*, *Retention*, and *Promotion* are presented in relation to hiring practices, job retention, and navigating the pathway to obtaining promotions. As a point of reference, all participants work in districts that have goals to recruit and hire applicants of color. Informal roles are presented at the end of the section.

*Hiring.* Participants shared their experiences of becoming employed in their current districts and noted the entry points as well as challenges to entry points. Gianna reflected on the political nature of hiring practices in her school district:

It's really political in this district. And the token kind of thing is more prevalent because there's not enough [African American educators]. There's just not enough. And the way that they treat it—they meaning those that are in authority—are like... they're on this hunt for qualified brown people. ...am I a quota? Or a show piece? What is it? I would rather just be known for a person and that I do good work and it doesn't matter what I look like.

Rhonda shared her belief that it was probably in her favor to be a minority teacher in the current hiring culture in education.

I don't want to admit that. I would like to think that I got employed on merit alone. But I know people have to meet quotas and they have to have

a certain number of people. I'm African American and I'm a woman. So, tick off two of the columns.

As participants recounted their journey to being hired in their current predominantly white schools, the nature of connectedness between overarching themes manifested itself. In the case of Rhonda, she speaks of navigating the formal hiring process and also alludes to struggling with microinvalidations.

Although all participants were employed in school districts that advertise a district goal to increase diversity among faculty, not all participants believe the goal is genuine. As Susan stated, "It's lip service." The district where she works stated that it is a priority to hire minority educators, but Susan did not see this translate into an actual increase in the number of African American educators employed.

Sally shared some similar concerns to Susan's in terms of not seeing an actual increase in diversity among professional educators:

Every year you see plenty of African American and Asian candidates, but then when you go to new teacher orientation, it's predominantly white, if not all white. So, I know that it is a district goal to have a diverse staff that is reflective of the student population. But the change is slow.

Extremely slow.

She went on to question the process even further and expressed her discouragement and lack of faith in the system:

It can be just a little disheartening. I would love to dig into this. Just what is it that—'cause you can't tell me that all of these people who come to the recruitment fair are just not qualified for these positions. ... But you know

all these white people are? What is the breakdown? ...what is happening in the screening process that maybe the applicants are not being sent to the building administrators [for the next step in the application process]? I don't know.

*Retention.* Once African American women are hired in the district, they do not necessarily experience the option to sit back and reap the rewards of having successfully navigated the hiring process. Participants in this study reflected on their feelings of being constantly scrutinized, being highly visible and shared how that impacted their sense of job security. In particular, Sarah recalled a conversation she had with her supervisor that left her feeling as though she was constantly having to prove herself:

My principal did say, 'Well, I hired you because you're smart. We have to show everyone that you're smart. ...I need you to speak up at staff meetings and prove that you can speak. Prove that you have background, prove that you have knowledge. I want to demonstrate, I want to prove that I didn't hire you just because—' ... He never [actually] said '...because you're a brown face.' It was almost like 'now you have to prove that you were good enough to be hired.'

Christina summarized her experience succinctly, citing good fortune at being hired, and the hard work she did to stay employed: "I think I was blessed in the sense of getting into [my school district]. ...Blessed getting in and I've worked myself to death to prove myself. And I think the right people have noticed and I continue to pray for that."

*Promotion.* Throughout this study African American women educators shared their experiences of how they came to work in public education and their hopes for their professional futures. Lisa reflected on her upbringing and the high expectations and seeking of educational and professional advancement that her family communicated to her: "...they're always moving the goal post. Once you have reached one goal... And I would venture to say that's how a lot of African American women are raised." Lisa's beliefs expressed that high achievement is a cultural concept. This, however, quickly becomes a problem when African American women are in places that do not recognize their leadership skills. Lisa stated, "They don't see us as leaders or role models, or head of the class. They only see us as the janitors. And it's detrimental."

Chantelle shared her experience of how adjusting her behavior and limiting her social contact with peers impacted opportunities for promotion negatively. "I don't go out with them social (white males/administrators) even though I could go and I know that's when networking happens." Chantelle recognized that networking opportunities frequently take place during out of office time, but the risks of getting involved outside the workplace may outweigh the potential benefit due to the close scrutiny and delicate balancing act of having to walk a tight rope where the tension and slack is controlled by others.

Chantelle shared her personal beliefs about the political nature of hiring and promotion that takes place in her district: "They can't have too many of us there." Chantelle's comment suggested an underlying meaning: there is a level of discomfort felt if there are too many black faces in predominantly white schools. Chantelle expounded further on her observations of the promotion process in her district:



Specifically Black females. African American males have gotten admin[istration] positions. They're in the good old boys club. Black females who know him (referring here to one black male employee, in particular) say that he plays the role even though there's more to him than that. We (African American women) can't do that. We don't get to do that.

Chantelle's reflection astutely shed light on the increased challenges that African American women educators face when they seek advancement in their employment. To be black and a woman draws two strikes against being seen as a leader in a predominantly white district where the majority of administrators and district leaders are white males. African American women educators have not been afforded the same level of access to as Chantelle stated, "the good old boys' club."

When reporting on their understanding of the pathway to promotion, participants shared their views on the obstacles to securing leadership roles. Chantelle expressed a general unwillingness to shed her genuine self-identity and distort herself to fit in the crooked room of administration:

I don't know how it's supposed to happen. 'Cause the ones that have made it.... It's like you have to have a certain façade about yourself. ...  
Like you can't be your real self to make it to that level!

Sarah also addressed the struggles of seeking promotion in her current majority white school district, weighing the costs of becoming an administrator:

[T]o be honest, I have no desire to be an administrator [in my current district]. If I had to work this hard to be a classroom teacher there is no

way I would survive being an administrator ‘cause I’m not willing to give my life in the way that they would want me to give my life to prove to them. I wouldn’t want to take an administrative job proving to them over and over. ... I believe in white districts it’s harder to move up.

Sally spoke to her understanding of the pathway to being promoted in her district and cited endorsement as a necessary component for promotion to take place. “...it wasn’t until I transferred and got in with a different group of people who supported me and ...recognized some talents I had that things started to shift for me.” Sally recalled a specific committee she served on with some administrators and district leaders:

I feel like things started to shift at that point. I think that had a lot to do with it—being in those spaces [i.e. meetings with influential administrators and district leaders]. It has a lot to do with the space that you’re in. I feel like I’ve had to make efforts to insert myself into these spaces.

Sally’s story aligns with the experiences of others that indicate relationships with others have a large part to play in hiring, retention, and promotion. These accounts provided by participants called attention to the political and networking aspect of opportunities for hiring and promotion that take place in school districts. Further reflection on this is provided in Chapter Five as it relates to implications for school administration and hiring teams.

***Navigating Informal Roles.*** Participants reported an awareness of being held to certain unspoken expectations in place regarding the roles and positions they were able to hold. Participants shared an awareness of certain unspoken rules. For example, when

there is a miniscule representation of African American women in leadership positions in school districts, the unspoken message is that black women are restricted to certain roles within the school setting. The following participant responses provided a perspective on the role of being the Black Expert and the Black Spokesperson.

*Black Expert.* Mabokela (2007) posited that the Black Expert refers to teachers who were hired just to teach the black children. In Chantelle's experiences, she was often called upon to be the expert on all matters regarding teaching African American students. Chantelle shared her experiences of how she reacted after being told by a coworker that she was "only hired to help the black kids." This message casts a doubly damaging message. To Chantelle, it meant that she was seen as valid only for a specific population of students. The other message was that black students generally have more challenging behavior issues and are harder to manage. Mabokela and Madsen (2007) found that "African American teachers prefer to identify themselves as persons with more general roles than just the 'black expert' who was hired to teach students of color" (p. 1190). Carol expressed this same belief as she recounted her experiences of being valued only when working black students. "...I'm like, am I only here for them? That's sad because the majority of the school is not black. So, what are you saying? Am I a disservice to my non-black [students]?"

*Black Spokesperson.* The term of the Black Spokesperson was utilized to convey the misinformed notion that one African American person can be expected to address all issues related to the Black Community. By attempting to garner the support and input of one Black person, the initiator effectively silences the voices of all other African

American persons. One voice is seen as sufficient to represent the perspective all African Americans. Examples of this were shared from several participants.

Christina addressed this in her account of being asked to speak during a faculty meeting on issues related to Ferguson and race relations in her school: “[It] is the only staff meeting that my principal asked me to co-facilitate with him.” Christina directly attributed this to race and considers the message behind this:

To me that sends me the message of ‘You’re the expert in being black.

You get to talk. Now, you’re not an expert in anything else, though. You don’t get to talk the rest of the year, but this one—you get to talk.’

In instances of having to navigate being called upon to be the Black Expert to black students or act as a Black Spokesperson and report on issues that are seen as solely affecting black people, African American women were faced again with misrecognition that implied they are valid and capable only in limited areas. Knowing that this reality does not stand as a self-truth, African American women educators are faced with the challenge of resisting the force of the slanted walls of the crooked room and aligning themselves with their own truths. Concepts of how African American women educators exercise influence in their professional settings and begin to address the disorientation of being in a crooked room are addressed further in Chapter Five.

### **Themes Related to Research Question Three: How do African American Women Educators Successfully Navigate their Work in the Public School System?**

**African American women educators possess skills and traits that promote success.** Clearly the accounts of African American women educators painted a less than ideal picture of their experiences of working in predominantly white schools. It would be

misleading, however, to report only on the struggles of African American women educators and neglect to tell the stories of strength and resiliency that allowed them to exist and, in some cases, thrive in their hostile work environments. All participants shared their input on what worked to keep them sane in an imperfect system and help them stand up straight in a crooked room. Three common subthemes are shared below: having support, awareness of protective strategies, and personal factors related to inner strength.

*Support: It takes a village.* Showing up to work every day in a hostile work environment that sees you as “less than” takes a certain level of grit and determination. All 10 participants affirmed the need to have a support system to help them make meaning of their sometimes tiring experiences in their work environments. Although not all participants had the good fortune to have readily accessible systems of support at work, two participants did and shared their stories. Susan attributed some of her success to working in a supportive department, wherein her colleagues and immediate supervisor had similar backgrounds, perspectives, and beliefs about the importance of social justice and diversity in education.

For me personally... I am surrounded [by like-minded coworkers]. And beyond that I have people I can seek out readily. . M is my go-to person! He and I really click—sometimes we’ll be in a meeting and just look at each other across the table. ... And he’ll be thinking the same thing.

Susan pointed to a support network as a means of being validated in her work, even when she is in the minority. Additionally, she spoke of the level of support she received from a veteran African American teacher who she saw as a role model:

I have made a beeline to her office several times this year. In ways that I hadn't before. ...I've had times where I have no agenda to see students and have gone to her and asked "can I close your door?" (for a private conference).

Susan was not alone in her testament of needing the support of others to find success in a predominantly white school. Sarah also attributed her current success in education to having the fortunate experience of working with an African American woman administrator who acted as a mentor to her:

...she said she felt that my spirit had been crushed and she felt that she was here to help Black women. She had been through some things as a Black woman and here was a young girl whose spirit had been crushed—I need to take her in. And as a result of that, that's where I started thriving. Under her, I took off.

Sarah's and Susan's experiences of having the support of another knowledgeable African American woman educator proved to be critical to their success. The benefits of having a mentor are further explored in Chapter Five.

*Protective strategies.* All participants recalled feeling the need to engage in self-protection behaviors. The cross-relationships between categories in social science research is noted here again as some protective behaviors have been addressed in previous sections: adjusting behavior and playing the game. Additionally, two prominent themes emerged as being key for surviving in predominantly white schools: maintaining professional distance and knowing your rights.

Chantelle outlined the steps she employed to ensure her professionalism was never called into question:

I do prepare a lot. I research. I like to be ready. I would say that I like to learn. On my way to work, I listen to gospel music. I like to arrive early, before everyone else. I guess this is one of the norms—I have to appear personable and available. And be very collaborative and work with everyone. Because if I'm too quiet, [people question that] like "oh, who does she think she is?" So, I get to work before everyone else so I can set my day. And when other people get there, they come into my room and talk. Everyone likes to come to me. ... That's something I have learned to do. Before, my first year, I was getting there 20 minutes before we had to be there. People were like trying to make conversation about the weekend, 'oh, what did you do...?' I'm a work first person. I'm supposed to work first and then I can socialize. I need to make sure my stuff is right and then I can socialize. But I learned that I need to be available.

Through sharing her approach to keeping a professional stance, Chantelle provided a detailed account of the personal dedication she demonstrated to make sure she meets the expectations of being approachable and accessible and without disclosing too much personal information and still managing her work load.

Sarah directly addressed the need to know your rights as it relates to employment and retention. In the same statement, she also spoke to the need to be vigilant in maintaining a professional stance:

...I know I have rights. And I know what the law says. I'm very well acquainted with how you can get rid of me and how you can't get rid of me. (laughs) My administration knows that too. So you can't come around the back door at me because I'm very knowledgeable about my qualifications and what you haven't done. So don't point your finger at me when you haven't crossed your *T*s and dotted your *I*'s! And I've crossed all mine and dotted every last one of mine! 'Cause that's one thing I've been taught—Don't give them anything! Don't give them anything to fall back on!

***Personal factors related to inner strength.*** Participants also cited personal traits and sources for finding meaning as factors that helped them successfully navigate their roles within their schools systems.

***Family of origin and upbringing.*** Though all participants who participated in this study identified as African American women, their upbringing and familial experiences were not identical. Participants' experiences varied widely as they related to their families of origin. The majority of the women in this study, seven of 10, reported being raised in middle class families, and three experienced growing up in working class families. The neighborhoods in which participants were raised varied, ranging from all white to racially diverse to all black neighborhoods. Regardless of their own experiences, all participants acknowledged that their previous experiences played a role in their current approach to navigating their predominantly white environments. For example, Kara stated that she felt attending a predominantly white suburban high school



provided her with some level of background knowledge and prepared to work in her current school district.

Similarly, related to family of origin, several participants credited their internal sense of personal strength to stemming from their familial roots. Gianna shared that she received tremendous material and emotional support through messages from her family: “you always want to carry yourself to a higher esteem period.” Additionally, Gianna attributed important life lessons on surviving in the workplace as coming from her mother: “...my mom has always taught me that: Your business is your business. It’s separation of church and state. Big time.”

Susan attested to the positive influence her parents had on her sense of personal strength:

It’s that I just believed in myself enough. My parents really fostered that in me. You know, your parents tell you [that] you can be anything you want to be. I don’t know that I so much believed that but, but I did feel like I could do whatever I wanted to do. ...Obstacles were something that other people put in place. ...I grew up believing, knowing that. ...I want to say that I knew who I was as an African American female. Because we had books, we had artwork that looked like me.

By being raised in an environment that valued African Americans through literature and artwork, Susan was exposed to a counter-narrative that helped her foster a strong sense of self.

Likewise, Lisa shared a similar experience of having a strong sense of her identity as an African American despite being raised in a predominantly white neighborhood:

Both my parents are African American. They've always identified as African American. We had the Ebony Encyclopedias on the coffee table. ...my mother... had a strong sense of herself and a strong sense of being African American. And even though we grew up in a predominantly white community, that was still very much part of who we were. We were still Black.

This strong sense of racial awareness provides a counter narrative to the stereotypes and misperceptions of being in a crooked room.

*Self-Awareness.* Participants also spoke of their own awareness of their sense of personal strength without mention of having gained this from their families of origin. Maturity and lived experience were often paired with this growing sense of personal strength and appreciation of self. Rhonda reflected on this: "The older I get, the easier it is for me to speak up... I'm just more calm. More comfortable with myself." Lisa, who will retire in just a few years, described a conscious decision to not try to measure herself up against the expectations of others. "I just got tired of feeling like I was on pins and needles the whole time. Trying to feel like I met someone else's expectations... and always feeling that I didn't."

*Focusing on the greater good—I do it for the kids.* Lisa shared that her ability to remain focused on her purpose as a teacher is what helps her navigate her work environment. "When a kid is in my classroom, I try not to...I try not to let our relationship with their parents be what keeps me from teaching their kid.... I try to be above it all."

*Focusing on the greater good—I do it to keep the conversation going.* Sally reflected on her sense of duty to increase diversity in her school as why she pushes forward in her role as a rising educator:

I feel like in regards to where I work, I also feel like I can't not be here. Because there's also risks associated with not working in a predominantly white school district.... If I don't go and do it, then somebody else is gonna feel that way and not try. 'Cause for me there was something that pushed me to go for it. But for somebody else, just me occupying that space might give someone else—another person of color a reason to try....It's like you have to be there, 'cause if you're not, change will not be able to occur.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the themes that emerged from interviews with ten African American women educators. Direct quotes reflected the responses from participants and provided specific supporting detail. The following four primary themes emerged from the selective coding process:

1. African American women educators encounter expressions of racism in their schools.
2. African American women adjust their behavior to fit within their school environments.
3. African American women face additional barriers when gaining access to and navigating their roles in predominantly white schools.

4. African American women educators possess skills and traits that promote their success.

These themes generated implications for professionals working with African American women educators. Recommendations, discussion, and conclusions are presented in Chapter Five.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions**

In this study the personal accounts of 10 African American women educators, participants, and myself as principal researcher, shared stories of working in predominantly white public school systems and addressed specific challenges, hardships, joys, and triumphs that emanated from being present in this field of work. This chapter provides a summary of the findings of the study, addresses important implications, conclusions, and recommendations for future research related to this topic. The information and discussion provided in this chapter are directly related to the findings and themes presented in Chapter Four. The information presented in this study reflected the views of unique individuals and, although it cannot be generalized to all African American women, the information is important for counselors, counselor educators, and professional educators.

#### **Summary of Study**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of African American women educators working in predominantly white public school districts. African American women working in these educational settings faced unique challenges and thus had distinct experiences that may impact their roles, responsibilities, and interactions with others in that setting. Given the dearth of research in counselor education literature, the following interpretations and recommendations are made in order to broaden our awareness regarding the experiences of African American women, and to explore ways in which we as counselor educators can be change agents as practitioners, administrators, and consultants.

### **Interpretations of Findings**

Chapter Four addressed the following four primary themes that emerged from participant responses:

1. African American women educators encounter expressions of racism in their schools.
2. African American women adjust their behavior to fit within their school environments.
3. African American women face additional barriers when gaining access to and navigating their roles in predominantly white schools.
4. African American women educators possess skills and traits that promote success.

**African American women educators encounter expressions of racism in their schools.** This strong, direct statement concisely summarizes the fundamental problems faced by African American women educators who work in predominantly white schools. Readers are urged to recall again that this study was not designed to create broadly generalizable results. That being said, readers are encouraged to acknowledge that this statement reflects the personal truths of all participants in this study, the researcher included. It is necessary to see this as truth, rather than hide behind the inclination to deny that racism exists in schools.

***Stereotypes and Microaggressions.*** African American women educators are likely to experience the disorientating effects of being placed in a crooked room when they work in predominantly white school districts. African American women educators are challenged to stand up straight when they are misrecognized and viewed as mammy

or an angry black woman, or are pressured to fit the mold of the superwoman. The misrecognition that follows being seen in a stereotypical manner stifles the right of African American women to have true self-expression. When African American women are seen as a stereotype, they risk being robbed of the chance to define themselves and instead are burdened with the negative perceptions of others. Predominantly white schools are susceptible to infestations of stereotyped beliefs if there are not counter-stories to these misperceptions. Increasing diversity among professional educators raises opportunities for the sharing of counter-stories.

African American women educators working in predominantly white schools are likely to face a myriad of microaggressions throughout their careers. In addition to facing stereotypes, African American women educators may be challenged about their qualifications, their professional abilities, or how they came to be employed in certain districts. These confrontations can disrupt the sense of citizenship, or feelings of membership, that African American women educators are able to experience in their school settings. Recalling that establishing strong working relationships in schools is a critical aspect of cultivating a positive school climate, it is imperative that school administrators and school counselors are dedicated to helping all members of the school community feel that they are welcomed and that they belong.

Navigating a hostile work environment places a considerable amount of stress on African American women. This stress may jeopardize the professional lives of African American women and compromise their job security; which, in turn affects other major life areas, such as health and socioeconomic status. In trying to stand up straight in a crooked room by battling stereotypes and microaggressions, African American working

in predominantly white schools are actively pushing back against oppressive expressions of racism.

**African American women adjust their behavior to fit within their school environments.** Participants reported feeling as though they were not fully able to be themselves in their schools and that they engaged in masking behavior to downplay differences. These differences were expressed through three different themes: having to work twice as hard, adjusting their behavior by playing the game, and living as though one is being scrutinized under a microscope. These adjustments in behavior may result in African American women educators being limited in their self-expression.

***Working Twice as Hard.*** African American women educators are faced with certain burdens as we navigate environments fraught with obstacles that threaten our successes. Participants shared experiences of having to work twice as hard as white co-workers. A few participants shared views on the specific gender differences for African American men and women. Two participants expressed opinions that black men have a harder time than black women, navigating through white public schools. The remaining participants did not share the same sentiment, but opined that African American women have a harder challenge than African American males in traversing the educational setting because they do not have male privilege possessed by African American men.

This constant battle of having to balance working twice as hard and not earning the level of recognition that is deserved should be contemplated from two different perspectives: 1) Why is this happening? 2) What are the associated outcomes or costs of this happening? Under the first line of questioning—Why is this happening?—I urge counselors and counselor educators to consider the concept of stereotype threat as it



applies to this situation. Steele and Aronson's (1995) definition of stereotype threat, "being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group" (p. 797), holds useful application in this study. Counselors and counselor educators should be aware of internal dialogues that are likely taking place for African American women as they battle against stereotypes that African Americans are lazy and undeserving. Additionally, Steele and Aronson pointed out that individuals confronted with stereotypes and managing stereotype threat may experience anxiety, internalized inferiority, and the threat of being treated in a stereotypical manner. In these cases, African American women educators may feel the need to respond to this pressure by working twice as hard to prove they are anything but lazy.

The second layer of consideration in addressing the costs to African American women educators who press themselves to work twice as hard can be further examined into two distinct areas: 1) impact on self and 2) impact on others and the work environment. The impact on the African American woman educator who is working twice as hard in her work environment is likely to be increased health risks (physical health risks of African American women were addressed in detail in Chapter Two). Additionally, there is an increased level of stress associated with working twice as hard, yet not being recognized for this work. In reflecting on the impact on others and the work environment, I urge readers to recognize the insidious nature of systemic racism and its perpetuation. African American women working twice as hard to achieve recognition and find success in predominantly white spaces are engaging, to some extent, in propagating this cycle. As African American women seeking professional success, we

are faced with a seemingly impossible task—to fight the system in a manner that allows us to stay in this space, but not be absorbed or possessed by it.

*Playing the game.* When placed in an environment that sees us as “other,” African American women often experience situations in which we adjust our behavior as a means of experiencing less harm. Although expressed in different ways, the underlying message is clear: we must change ourselves if we want to fit the systems in which we work. These adjustments take many forms: editing our words obsessively, self-censoring of our own voices, keeping professional distance, guarding ourselves from fully getting to know colleagues, carefully considering the risks of speaking or not speaking in most settings and then cautiously monitoring what we say and to whom we say it. Counselors and counselor educators should be aware of the costly impact on individuals who continuously engage in this highly stressful self-monitoring behavior: lack of freedom for self-expression and losing a sense of oneself can result.

*Living under a microscope and living on stage.* Participants reflected on incidents of feeling like all their actions were being viewed under a microscope and shared their reactions to the scrutiny that followed. Similar to feeling like all their actions were being judged, participants expressed acute awareness that their minority status in their schools made them feel at times as though they were in the spotlight. In schools where there is little diversity among professional staff—in particular teachers, principals, and counselors—African American women are highly visible. As a result of this hypervisibility, we often feel the sense that all of our actions are on display for all to see and judge. In attempting to reduce or avoid judgment, we may engage in adjusting our

behavior and actions. This sense of hypervisibility can take a toll on our health and decrease the sense of well-being and belonging hoped for in our work environments.

The implications of having to continually monitor and adjust behavior to meet the needs of others can be detrimental to African American women. As we adjust our behavior to make others more comfortable, to fit our environments, or to reduce judgment from others, we run the risk of losing a piece of ourselves. Counselors and counselor educators must be aware of the potential interplay between being highly visible and adjusting behavior so as to avoid scrutinizing judgment. The duality of being in an environment that sees us in a lesser light than we see ourselves is problematic in the sense that it infringes on our access to freedom of self-expression. Additionally, since access to this space is directly related to employment and livelihood, it is even more critical that we are able to navigate our places of work successfully. This link to employment is further explored in the next section.

**African American women face additional barriers when gaining access to and navigating their roles in predominantly white schools.**

**Navigating Formal Roles: Hiring, Retention, and Promotion.**

African American women educators in this study expressed an awareness that race plays a role in obtaining employment in predominantly white school districts. Participants presented unique and varied narratives of their experiences in gaining and retaining employment in their respective school districts. Some participants saw their racial diversity as a beneficial factor in securing employment. Three participants, in particular, believed that their status as African

American women had a positive effect on being hired—especially in school districts that held a goal of increasing racial diversity among professional educators.

This perceived advantage did not, however, automatically translate into sustained advantage for African American women as it related to retention and promotion. Participants reported feeling as they had to continuously prove themselves as deserving of their positions throughout their careers. This sense of having to prove oneself may result in African American women educators experiencing increased levels of work related stress and anxiety. Relatedly, Casad (2016) asserted that stereotype threat is particularly relevant to personnel selection practices and as such, parties involved in these processes must be aware of the potential negative effects on individuals belonging to the stereotyped group.

Though racial identity alone cannot be isolated as the sole impeding factor for obtaining promotion, all but one of the participants who actively sought promotions cited race as playing a role in being passed over for a promotion. It may be the case that minority status may have an initial positive impact on being hired, however, it may have a detrimental impact for participants seeking promotion. This is evidenced by disproportionately small numbers of African American women educators holding leadership positions in predominantly white school districts. Participants were acutely aware of the lack of racial diversity in administrative and district leadership roles. Not seeing other African American women in positions of leadership throughout their district discouraged some

participants from believing they could hold administrative roles within their current school districts.

Finding success as a professional educator requires African American women to be able to successfully navigate processes related to hiring, retention, and promotion. Counselors and counselor educators are urged to be familiar with the intersection of racial and gender status on trends in employment. Stereotype threat, as addressed previously, has wide-reaching implications for African American women educators and has relevant application in the area of personnel decisions such as hiring and promoting. Casad (2016) asserted that individuals experiencing stereotype threat may perceive they have fewer options for pursuing leadership positions. Career counselors, in particular, are encouraged to reflect on the findings presented in this study and develop further competency and supportive practices to counter the harmful emotional and psychological impacts of discriminatory employment practices on African American women educators. The practices may include facilitating substantive conversation about stereotype threat and its existence and impact in the workplace. By acknowledging the reality of stereotype threat and validating individuals' associated feelings to this threat, an affirming foundation is set for further career counseling.

**Navigating Informal Roles.** In addition to managing their formal roles and job descriptions, African American women educators may find themselves engaging in duties that are not part of their official job duties. Engaging in extra duties is not unique to African American women educators; however, the specific nature of these duties arguably are more apt to be imposed upon African American women.

***Black Expert.*** African American women are more likely to be seen as having expert knowledge on the insights and inner-workings of African American students. Related, in part, to the mammy archetype, there is a belief that African Americans, women in particular, are experts on decoding African American children. There is certainly some validity to this relationship; however, the issue of relationship is not the issue. Harm is imminent when African American women are only invited to conversations about black students. Additional unintended harm may be done to white or other non-black educators if they are asked to step aside so the “expert” can weigh in.

***Black Spokesperson.*** Similar to the black expert being asked to only speak to issues about black students, African American women are being denied their rights as citizens when they are disproportionately asked to address black issues. To clarify, the issue is not that our opinions should not be requested, rather this should not be the only time that our input matters.

A primary harm done to African American women educators being pulled into conversation as a black expert or black spokesperson is that a message is sent to African Americans: you are not in control of when your voice matters, you are only needed when there is a “black issue.”

### **Implications for Practice**

African American women educators who work in predominantly white schools experience a unique set of challenges and engage in different behaviors and actions in order to successfully navigate their way through a system that routinely discriminates against and oppresses them. This generates several implications for counselor educators and other stakeholders.

**African American women educators encounter expressions of racism in their schools.** First and foremost, the fact that racism exists in schools must be acknowledged. I previously asserted that as a Critical Race Theory (CRT) researcher, I take the personal stance that action is required! In other words, following the rules established to keep racism working is not a good plan to stop racism. By employing a CRT approach, an initial first step is to acknowledge there is a problem. As part of this, individuals must be aware of their own biases and beliefs about race. Three specific CRT tenets are reviewed and applied to this study:

*The challenge to dominant ideology.* This study challenged dominant ideology by presenting the voices of African American women educators who have been marginalized in the work environments. CRT posits that the concept of objectivity does not exist and that upon closer inspection, there is an inequitable agenda that leaves the dominant culture in a position to benefit. Counselor educators are urged to challenge dominant ideology in their own spheres of influence by raising awareness of how one culture may benefit at the expense of other, marginalized populations.

*A commitment to social justice.* It is my stance that racism and discrimination are indicative of larger, macro system issues that are also acted out on an individual, micro level. Therefore, readers are prompted to develop their own personal, as well as professional, CRT based action plans that lead to “elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty” and “the empowerment of subordinated minority groups” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). In addressing macro level issues, counselors and counselor educators are urged to be cognizant of institutional policies within their workplaces that perpetuate the subordination of marginalized groups and to then take action to challenge and dismantle

said policies and practices. In addressing micro level issues of racism and discrimination, counselors and counselor educators are prompted to develop a personal agenda that incorporates professional growth in the area of diversity. Since counselors are situated to have the opportunity to act as social justice advocates on an interpersonal level, it is imperative that they have an appreciation and respect of multicultural awareness.

*The centrality of experiential knowledge.* Critical race theory appreciates and embraces the importance of storytelling. Readers are encouraged to reflect on the value of storytelling, as evidenced by this study, in allowing marginalized groups to speak their truths in their own words. Counselor educators and counselors are prompted to explore how storytelling can be used within their practice as a way to help marginalized individuals realize the power of sharing their stories.

**African American women adjust their behavior to fit within their school environments.** As a counselor, I am concerned with the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals and thus understand the potential for harm to be incurred when the individual alters herself to fit a crooked environment. Hence, I have determined the following needs must be addressed: safety and self-expression.

Beyond thinking immediately and solely of physical safety, the psychological safety of African American women educators must be considered. African American women educators face psychological and emotional harm when they are constrained in environments that fail to recognize them as individuals and subject them to stereotypes. African American women educators have the right to freedom of expression, yet may not feel that this is so when others who hold power in their environments scrutinize their actions and wait for a misstep or mistake.



Both of these needs can be addressed by creating safe spaces within their schools that provide a haven. Examples may include physical spaces (having “own space”- classroom or office and being able to close a door) or emotionally safe spaces – such as being with allies or supportive colleagues.

**African American women face additional barriers when gaining access to and navigating their roles in predominantly white schools.** Opportunities come from being in the right space. Professional endorsement plays an important part in being considered for promotion. More specifically, professional endorsement can be described as a job candidate being endorsed or supported by an established, valued member of the school community. Individuals who play a part in hiring processes can be instrumental in helping African American women gain access to employment and promotion opportunities. School districts that are genuinely sincere in their efforts to increase diversity among their staff are challenged to consider the entirety of this study and apply meaningful changes to their hiring practices. Specifically, it is necessary to consider who is present in making decisions about hiring policies.

**African American women educators possess skills and traits that promote success.** African American women possess an impressive capacity for strength, as evidenced by the ability to incur injustices and continue to strive for recognition. I propose that there is healing power in the strength and resiliency demonstrated by African American women that can act as a means to move the increase awareness of the issues faced by African American women educators. The need for *Sister Keepers* among African American women educators is reflected in the words of Harris-Perry (2011):

“these women heal the wounds of misrecognition by learning to see themselves reflected through the empathetic eyes of other black women who share their experiences” (p. 52).

Following this affirmation of the power held by African American women to speak to and address their own needs, I propose the implementation of mentoring programs wherein veteran African American women educators mentor newer African American women educators and help them navigate the terrain of predominantly white schools. Such programs may be beneficial as they allow participants to make the time to share stories, which act as counter-narratives to one-sided dominant narratives. Additionally, there is power in the unification of voices - a reminder to one another of who we are, from where we came, and where we are headed. By partnering with a veteran mentor, African American women educators can be joined in a mutually beneficial partnership where both parties stand to benefit.

The intended primary audience for this dissertation are counselor educators and as such, much of the discussion of implications and recommendations is geared toward these professionals. Nonetheless, these overall findings are also relevant to professional counselors who may work with African American women educators, school administrators, including leaders in charge of professional development, and school leaders involved in hiring practices.

**Administrative implications.** Lack of administrative support was cited as a significant concern by several participants. Administrators who are truly concerned with providing a positive environment for black teachers need to consider the level of support—both emotional support as well as material support and resources—that they provide to professional educators. Administrators must be aware of their own

perspectives and beliefs surrounding racism and appreciation of diversity and how their attitudes impact interactions with staff. Through working on their own development in diversity and multiculturalism, administrators can become more effective in creating trusting relationships with teachers, counselors, and other professional educators.

Two participants cited feeling that their status as African American women (recall the mammy stereotype) led to their classrooms being disproportionately composed of students, often students of color, who exhibited challenging behavior concerns. In some instances, administrators may believe they are demonstrating their confidence in the ability of African American teachers by placing students with challenging behaviors into the classrooms of these educators. Administrators need to be aware, however, of the impact and possible unintended consequences of their actions—potential teacher burnout and disrupted learning for all students in that classroom. Therefore, administrators are urged to engage in meaningful, collaborative discussion with teachers.

School administrators must be aware of the relationship between African American women educators and low educational performance issues with students of color. When we intentionally and directly confront historically racist systems and discriminative practices that exploit marginalized students, we are then better equipped to address the factors that contribute to discrepancies in academic success. Boser (2011) reported that “teachers of color serve as role models for students, giving them a clear and concrete sense of what diversity in education—and our society— looks like” (p. 1). School administrators are urged to understand the importance of this relationship in increasing the performance of students of color and then commit to increasing diversity among professional educators in their schools.

### **Unexpected Findings**

**Expressions of internalized oppression.** During the course of my interviews, I encountered, quite unexpectedly, expressions of internalized oppression from more than one participant. Assuredly, I understand the concept and know it exists, but I was caught off guard that I would encounter it in my interviews with professional educators. This then alerted me to a potential bias that I had not yet explored. As I reflected on this, I became aware that I held the belief that perhaps professional educators would be immune to chains of internalized oppression. I became aware that I had been assuming that exposure to higher education (all participants possess a degree in education and hold professional certification) would translate into deeper self-awareness of how we, as African American women, are negatively impacted by racism and ensuing internalized oppression.

**Personal Impact.** Even now, as I prepared to end my journey to complete this dissertation, I was struck again and again about how much this research had affected me personally. Having heeded the stories of numerous people who shared with me their experiences of conducting research and developing a personal connection with their research, I felt prepared to experience shifting degrees of excitement, frustration, and stagnation. I was not, however, truly prepared for the wide range and depth of emotions that I felt during interviewing other African American women educators. I have reflected countless times on the sense of responsibility that I feel in honoring the stories shared with me by the women who participated in this study. African American women have been woefully misrepresented or effectively omitted throughout the history of this nation and I want to ensure that this study provides a counter-narrative that demonstrates

respect, appreciates the courage, and honors our voices. In short, I end this study feeling the need to ‘get it right!’

**Ferguson.** This work seems incomplete without at least mentioning the impact that incidents in Ferguson have had on pushing conversations regarding race to the forefront. The civil unrest that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014 following the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed young black man, acted as a catalyst to bring conversations about race to the forefront of national and international attention. Covering the full story of Ferguson is beyond the scope of this paper, however, for further information and awareness of the importance of Ferguson to this study, readers are encouraged to seek further information in the work of Jamala Rogers’ book: *Ferguson Is America: Roots of Rebellion* (2015). In the majority of interviews and interactions that I had with African American women educators, some mention was made in regards to Ferguson and the impact in schools. In the wake of Ferguson becoming an international news story and at a time when “Black Lives Matter” yard signs are proudly displayed by some, this study is very timely. Our nation seems, if not ready to embrace, at least expecting conversations surrounding race. I have pondered the timing of this study and at times felt as though I could not finish fast enough—pressing to finish in this span of time when conversations about race are finally finding a place at the table. As race relations in our nation become more highly publicized through media outlets, it seems likely that even more conversations about the impact of race in multiple capacities will become necessary.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations associated with any research study and specific limitations of this study are addressed here. It is important to note that, since the primary focus is the experiences of African American educators who work in predominantly white public school districts, the present study included only input from African American women educators who work in school districts where the majority of students and faculty are white. In the area surrounding this city, there are school systems where the population is majority African American—for both students and staff. It is important to distinguish between these different schools as the experiences of African American women educators was likely to differ in these settings.

The expected sample size of this study was 12 to 15 participants and ultimately turned out to be 10 participants. The purpose in this basic qualitative research study was not to produce generalizable results, but rather to explore an issue—specifically the experiences of African American women educators working in majority white school settings. The number of participants may seem small to some, but may also be seen as a strength of this study because the results provide a descriptive set of experiences that may be suggestive of other African American women's experiences. Additionally, it should be noted that saturation was reached at eight participants and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation had been reached.

Another limitation of this study was that I am the principal and only researcher who conducted interviews and analyzed data. Though I was transparent in my roles as both a researcher and a participant by recording possible biases in the fieldwork journal, it is important to acknowledge that this study did not have another researcher or research

team present to act as a system of checks and balances. Additionally, I operated on the assumption that all participants responded openly, honestly, and accurately.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research may include considering relationships between African American women. While conducting interviews, I became aware of differences between participants in terms of their willingness or comfort in engaging in interviews. During my self-reflective process, I pondered possible reasons for this. One such reason may be related to participants' racial identity development. Tatum (1992, 1998) discussed the impact of racial identity development as it relates to the ability of an individual to engage in discussions of race and discrimination. One possible reason for a marked difference in the account of one outlier, who denied race has an impact on her, may be traced back to her racial identity development. Individuals who have not engaged in deep work on uncovering their own thoughts and beliefs about their own racial identity may be less apt to engage in discussions about race. The insistence of individuals who deny that racism exists may be explained by under-explored racial identity development or their own lack of awareness regarding expressions of internalized oppression.

Another possibility to be explored is that of relationships between African American women. Historically cast as characters that cannot be trusted, there is a certain level of mistrust that may be present between African American women colleagues. I invited more than 20 women to participate in this research study and in the end conducted only 10 interviews. Some lack of response was undoubtedly due to factors such as being too busy or not having time. It may be of consequence, however, to consider what role vulnerability and suspicion played in this. I posit that it may be important to contemplate

what it means for an African American woman to allow herself to be vulnerable while still receiving messages that she must strive to be a superwoman. Suspicion of discussing issues about race openly may be a natural reaction for some African American women who find themselves in environments where they are surrounded by people who view them as other or less than.

### **Final Reflections of Researcher**

As noted in Chapter Three, this research was in part an autoethnographic study. Throughout the course of my dissertation journey, I have kept a field journal recording observations as well as my thoughts, feelings, and theories about this work. This has been a long road and I have felt at times that I was ready to stop the process and at times I did—even if just long enough to come up for air and regain focus and my purpose for delving into this line of study. Engaging in CRT research is both a daunting process and a rewarding one. This work requires confronting race in a manner that unapologetically calls out racialized transgressions and acts of oppression. In doing so, I have been met with varied responses ranging from reluctance and resistance to full engagement and enthusiasm. In addition to raising awareness in others, I have also reflected on my growth and noted how my views have changed. I understand that it is imperative for me to engage in my own self-reflective process and become aware of my own biases as I expect others to do the same. I share here the first entry in my field journal from over three years ago.



October 14, 2012. Starting the dissertation journey began with my initial thoughts over 3.5 years ago when I interviewed for this program. I have developed so much deeper in my thinking about social justice and the achievement gap than where I was originally.

At the onset, I did not want to write about black topics and issues because I wanted to be taken seriously. Yes, I really thought that. I am just beginning to understand how deeply internalized my own oppression is. I did not want to associate myself as a scholar who writes only on black issues or issues of race. Yet, I'm writing about achievement gap, which consistently begs the issue of race be brought up. In a sense, I was aligning myself as a "good Black person"/a "good Black" who would help other Blacks to overcome obstacles and achieve.

My focus was to "help" students by helping them be "good Blacks" also. So, how have I hurt students by this practice of trying to get them to conform to a crooked room?

I do want to get something personal out of this dissertation experience—beyond the obvious goal of ending/finishing the Doctoral degree program. I started this Ed & Race class somewhat accidentally, but it is where I am meant to be. I have already gained so much from this class. I initially said I was taking it as a fun class, as a "therapeutic outlet" for myself, and it is truly serving that purpose—all joking aside. I am getting to a place where I am able, willing, and enthusiastic about discussing my experiences with racism.

Ending thought: I have a picture of myself from kindergarten that I keep in my office and I often look at this picture and imagine that I am working in a manner now (protective, providing safety, caring for, etc.) that I wish someone would have worked with me and for me.

In my first entry, I reflected on several elements that have repeatedly surfaced during my dissertation topic development stage, literature review, and researching stage as outlined in the sections below.

**Messages regarding race are delivered early and repeatedly.** My understanding of race and how to discuss race—or more accurately how to not discuss race—was solidified by meaningful interactions throughout my life. Initial messages came from my family of origin who personified good people—upstanding citizens, well-educated educators, and God-fearing people. Additional messages came from my progression through predominantly white spaces. I learned early on that conversations about race were to be avoided in certain arenas—they made others uncomfortable, or worse—they made a target out of you. I do not minimize or dismiss the fact that I was raised by people who experienced sanctioned racism firsthand. In this sense, I understand and appreciate why a parent would tell their child to remain silent if called the N-word. I think it is perfectly understandable to act in a manner that you believe will keep your child safe. I have grown in my understanding of social action and now also understand that though there are times when silencing your voice is necessary for safety; there are times when speaking out against injustices is just as necessary for survival.

**Racial awareness is not static.** My understanding of conversations about race has developed and continues to develop. I have grown in my understanding of and

willingness to engage in difficult conversations about race and I believe others are capable of this growth and development as well. Change comes about when several circumstances come together: a need for change is recognized, involved persons engage in the work of bringing about change, and old systems are challenged. I believe that all of these factors are present in the current education system. There is a need for change as educational inequity is seen in access to educational resources and disparities in performance. There is a growing body of educators committed to engaging in work that will bring about change and previously marginalized voices are binding together to enact change. Old systems to approaching education are being abandoned as evidence emerges to show they lack effectiveness to reach and serve all groups of students.

**Interactions regarding race do not exist in a vacuum.** My actions affect the actions and outcomes of others. In the above journal entry I specifically address the impact of this body of work on students. I know that students look to me for examples of what to do. They watch my actions to help them form their own ideas and choices. In addition to students, others are affected by racialized interactions—African American women, other persons of color, and white colleagues. My sister colleagues may need to lean on me and I on them. If I do not speak up against microaggressions committed by white colleagues—whether purposefully malicious or merely negligent—then white coworkers lose an experience to challenge their thinking and behavior. If I simply let a racial injustice go, let it slide, then I must consider the potential impact it has on other persons of color as well. By not confronting racism, we become part of the problem.

**Action is required.** As an African American woman, it is not enough for me to sit back, play by the rules of those in power and hope that I will be viewed by them as

deserving and will be uplifted and rewarded. So, toss the ‘good black girl’ card out the window. If the saying goes “Well behaved women seldom make history”, then I adapt my message for myself to: “Well behaved black women seldom make a difference.” In other words, following the rules established to keep racism working is not a good plan to stop racism. I recount here, the call to action for critical researchers:

Whereas traditional researchers cling to the guard rail of neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world. Traditional researchers see their task as the description, interpretation, or reanimation of a slice of reality, whereas critical researchers often regard their work as a first step toward forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself. (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 453)

At this juncture, I claim this study as my first step towards political action by bringing an increased awareness to stop the gross injustices that have been reported by African American women educators.

**Engaging in racialized work has an emotional impact.** Talking about race and confronting racism can be emotionally taxing. Because of this, people often avoid conversations and disconnect themselves from the process. I view this relationship between emotions and avoidance as a key intersection in applying the direct, engaging practices of CRT to counseling. The following section addresses exploring this relationship.

As a professional school counselor, I understand the impact emotions play on behavior. Generally, people engage in what feels good and avoid what feels bad.

Talking about race issues tends to feel bad for most people. We receive messages that reinforce this—it's impolite, it's tacky, it's hurtful, it's better left unspoken. Reflecting on the CRT practice to expose and confront imbalances of power, I address the role of emotion in this study with intentionality. I purposefully implore readers to give sufficient pause and consideration to the role emotions play in our interactions with each other. In an early draft of my dissertation, I opened this paper by recounting the reactions I get from people when I talk about my dissertation topic. People tend to roll their eyes and disengage from the conversation, or they lean in with the intent of furthering their understanding. This paper is dedicated to those who lean in, but I hope some of the rolling eyes rest on this discourse as well! I assert that we must acknowledge the feelings that are invoked when race related issues come up in conversation and when race issues are actively or passively avoided in conversation. It is no longer enough to follow our juvenile tendencies to avoid what feels bad and only engage in what feels good. When the conversations about race get tough, we may allow ourselves to step back to recharge, then re-engage, but not to permanently retreat.

**Reflections on the research process.** First and foremost, I revere this study as a powerful healing process for me and the participants who graciously shared their stories with me. Sharing your personal narrative and being in control of one's own story can be empowering. Too often in our daily operations, African American women are cheated of the ability to share their voices in a manner that honors their value and worth.

Completing this study provided a space for open and honest communication to take place.

My feelings about this study are overwhelmingly positive and affirming, yet there are other facets that must be shared as well, for the sake of full disclosure. At times,

engaging in interviews felt emotionally heavy. I addressed previously that dealing with racial issues can be laden with complex emotional pitfalls. As I engaged with the participants, I felt a sense of sisterhood and connection with these women. Even if our backgrounds and perhaps, specific details differed, we connected in our understandings on the culture of our current work spaces. With each interview, I felt a deeper sense of responsibility to share the stories of these African American women in respectful ways that honored them. Before beginning interviews, I was very familiar with research protocols that pressed the importance of protecting participants' identities. By the end of the data collection phase, I felt revolving waves of being cognitively and emotionally joined with these women. At numerous times throughout data collection and analysis, I reflected on how deeply my dissertation title, "I AM my Sister's Keeper" resonated with me and made sense on a fundamentally spiritual level. I am grateful for the opportunity to share our stories and honor voices and to collaborate with women who are actively engaged in this work.

### **Conclusion**

From the onset of this study, I have made the assertion that African American women educators encounter a unique set of challenges. Throughout this study I have made several claims that outline some of those challenges. It should be clear to readers that many complex dynamics must be considered when working with African American women educators and that at no point will a single approach be adequate to address all issues. I implore all constituents in public school systems to abandon searches for a quick fix and engage in the process of engaging with others from backgrounds differing from our own for the purpose of seeking true understanding.

Additionally we must be willing to challenge ourselves to engage in a genuine self-reflective process in which we are open to asking ourselves what role we play in a larger systemic problem of perpetuating oppression and racism. Our work in examining social issues is not complete until all voices can be heard and valued. The treatment of African American women educators is both about black women and also about other marginalized groups. As we increasingly take part in the work of dismantling racism by refusing to ignore social problems, we provide energy to move this process forward. The collective effort of numerous constituents working together enacts exponential energy to produce a reality in which previously silenced voices are honored and recognized for their valuable input to fixing a broken system.

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**Appendix A: Consent****Division of Counseling and Family Therapy**

One University Blvd.  
 St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499  
 Telephone: 314-516-5782  
 E-mail: llf9ac@umsl.edu

**Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities**

African American Women Educators

Participant \_\_\_\_\_ HSC Approval Number \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ PI's Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Lelia Flagg and Dr. Brian Hutchison. The purpose of this research is to hear more about the experiences of African American women who work in public education.
2. a) Your participation will involve:
  - Being interviewed by the Project Director, Lelia Flagg. During the interview you will be asked to respond to questions about your experiences working as an educator in a public school system.
  - You will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview. The location of the interview will be a location that is convenient and comfortable for you.

Approximately 12- 15 participants may be involved in this research.
- b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be approximately 1 hour and not longer than 2 hours. You will be asked to participate in one interview, but may be asked for clarification on your responses as needed at a later time.
3. There may be certain risks or discomforts associated with this research. They may include experiencing uncomfortable feelings that might come from answering certain questions.
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about the experiences of African American women educators and may help inform practices related to diversity and employment in school districts.
5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. If you want to withdraw from the study, you can

contact me at: lilyfb@gmail.com or 314-686-8728. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. By agreeing to participate, you understand and agree that your data may be shared with other researchers and educators in the form of presentations and/or publications. In all cases, your identity will not be revealed. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data. In addition, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked office.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Lelia Flagg at 314-686-8728 or the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Brian Hutchison at 314-516-6093. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research Administration, at 516-5897.

**I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.**

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

---

Participant's Printed Name

---

Signature of Investigator or Designee

---

Date

---

Investigator/Designee Printed Name

**Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

1. Please tell me about yourself and your background (clarifying: demographics: racial and gender identity, age range, etc)
2. Please share your story about how you began working in education. (clarifying: path to becoming an educator, years in the field, what grade level, current position)
3. What have your experiences been in working in a predominantly white school?
4. What were your experiences in your family of origin regarding race (clarifying: did your family talk about issues of race (status, skin color, expectations, etc) when you were growing up?
5. How do you see your status as an African American woman impacting your opportunities for recognition (personally, professionally, etc.)? (clarifying: do you feel that your race and gender have either positively or negatively impacted your employment opportunities?)
6. How do your experiences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, education, and/or religion impact your role as an educator?
7. What would you describe as the challenges you experience when there are no other or few other visible models who “look like you” in your work environment?
8. Do you feel you can be “yourself” in your educational setting? Please explain... [Further prompts: When? With whom? If not, what do you feel prevents this from happening? What would need to happen in order for you to be able to express yourself?]
9. Please share your experiences of being heard at your school? Say more... Do you feel you have a voice? In what aspect? In all spheres of influence? With all audiences?
10. What, if any, challenges have you experienced in sharing your voice, or being heard?
11. Please share any additional comments, future considerations, or parting thoughts.