

**District Middle Space Leadership in K-12 School Systems:
The Experiences of African American Women**

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined African American women as novice, veteran and former district middle space leaders in K-12 school systems. The current research on African American women in district middle space leadership is minimal. This study brought forth the experiences and navigation of experiences of district middle space leadership by African American women. The central questions for this study were: How do African American women experience district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems? How do African American women navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems?

The researcher employed life story interviewing and autoethnography. The study included four participants. One novice middle space leader (retained the position for three or less years). Two veteran middle space leaders (retained the position for four or more years). The final study participant was one former middle space leader (retained the position for a minimum of three years prior to leaving). The researcher's autoethnographic accounts were included in the study as well. Participants and researcher gave descriptive accounts of their experiences and the navigation of experiences from Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework: passage, challenges, location, tasks, roles, and mentoring relationships. The following perspective were derived from the study: (a) Intersection-Being African American and woman; (b) Visible Voicelessness; (c) Messenger in the Middle; and (d) Onliness and Loneliness of Solo Work.

The findings from this study added to K-12 district middle space literature. The study's findings also contributed to the theory of Black feminist thought. There were three primary limitations in the study. The first, due to the varying district sizes, and resources, results of the study may or may not be applicable. Secondly, with limited participants, interpretation from this

study may or may not be applicable to other African American women district middle space leaders. Finally, time constraints to obtain ample in-depth responses provided a limitation as well. Further research is recommended concerning African American women in district middle space leadership. African American women district middle space leaders without administrative certification is suggested as future research to add to existing middle space literature. Also, future research considering mentoring structures in K-12 school systems for African American women district middle space leaders is warranted.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Mrs. Daisy Bell Williams and my uncles, Cecil Williams and Eddie Williams. May God bless your souls. I can hear “Go Auburn! Go Auburn! Go Auburn Go!” from Heaven.

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Chapter 1: Overview of the Study

The exploration of middle management in the context of corporate settings has been researched extensively. Harding et al. (2014) suggested middle managers maintain a central position in organizational hierarchies, are responsible for implementing senior management strategies, and exercise control over junior staff (p. 1214). The implementation of policy and programs are determined by the level of authority middle managers may yield over junior staff members. Teulier and Rouleau (2013) described middle managers as those who define, negotiate, and enact new meanings through their multiple interactions with different internal and external stakeholders (p. 312). Middle managers work to ensure the meanings and interactions between stakeholders are positive reflections of the organization. These interactions require strategic planning and collaboration of upper, middle, and lower management. Salih and Doll (2013) asserted that middle managers are seen as strategic actors and play several strategic roles within organizations. The roles played by middle managers vary depending on the size and structure of the organization.

Oshry (2016) provided meaning to middle space as “Middleness is the condition in which we exist, between two or more individuals or groups; these groups have differing priorities, perspectives, goals, needs and wants; each of them exerts pressure on us to function on its behalf” (p. 3). Oshry’s summary of middle space reveals the complexity of middle space. The space may include a myriad of components such as the following: routines, assignments, clerical duties, spokesperson, and negotiator. Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework represents the aspects of middle space leadership. The conceptual framework includes six characteristics of middle space leadership (role, mentoring relationship, tasks, passages, challenges, and location). The framework also denotes subsections within the

characteristics. Middle space leaders are consumed with layered roles and responsibilities within organizations. For example, system facilitators who work across multiple levels of school district – supporting the evidence-based professional learning of individual teachers in classrooms and groups of educators in schools to achieve system goals and priorities (LaPointe-McEwan and Klinger, 2017). Assigned tasks, such as providing professional learning, also require additional layers of organizing material prior to delivering content.

In addition to the aforementioned definitions of middle space leadership, Armstrong (2009) described middle space as the location of middle managers in the organization, but it also refers to the “psychological and social phenomena” that emerged during the transition to the role of the new middle administrative position (p. 79). As middle space leaders venture to address varied responsibilities of middle space and the psychological aspect of middle space leadership, the demands of middle space leadership can be quite challenging. The weight of the space (positive and negative) further illustrates the need for more clarity and less ambiguity in the role, which is particularly unique to middle space leaders.

Titles of middle space leaders have rendered vagueness within the role. Armstrong (2017) listed such titles associated with middle space leaders in district level K-12 positions as the following: assistant superintendent, deputy assistant superintendent, directors, as well as coordinators. The nomenclature assigned coincides with the district’s organizational structure. As noted, middle space leaders in a large, urban school systems are regularly assigned the title of deputy assistant superintendent, whereas assistant superintendent, director, and/or coordinator are frequently assigned in a mid-level to small, rural school system. Even though varying titles exist, tasks remain notably similar within the role of middle space leadership at the district level in K-12 school systems. The middle manager has been tasked with gathering information for

internal use such as student data as well as gathering data in a systematic manner for community perceptions. The results of information gathered are often used by district leaders to assess the effectiveness of initiatives throughout the district. An examination of the Alabama Department of Education's (ALSDE) Public-School Systems Directory for 2020-2021 offered areas of middle space leadership participants such as: curriculum and instruction, special education, federal programs, and instructional supports. Though varied from district to district, Alabama K-12 school systems have remained anchored through the work of middle space district leaders.

This dissertation examined the experiences of African American women as district middle space leaders in K-12 school systems. The study also provided a lens into the way in which the study participants navigated the experiences. The participants included African American women as novice, veteran, and former district level middle space leaders. Wentling (2003) stated, "By studying and understanding the career development and aspirations, as well as barriers that exist for women in middle management positions, we can learn how to facilitate the development and achievement of women with regard to higher level management positions" (p. 312). As educational entities have made strides to increase the number of African American women, research is needed to better understand experiences, challenges, and successes of these leaders. This inquiry sought to aid in filling the current literature gap regarding middle space leadership in K-12 school systems by those who identify as an African American woman, thus, exploring Black feminist thought as the theory for this study.

Background

I became more courageous by doing the very things I needed to be courageous for – first, a little, and badly. Then, bit by bit, more and better. Being avidly – sometimes annoyingly – curious and persistent about discovering how others were doing what I wanted to do.
(Audre Lorde, as cited in Copage, 1993) p. 20)

This study explored experiences and the navigation of experiences by African American women as district middle space leaders. The expressions, shared experiences proved courageous for each study participant and revealed the essence of roles such as: deputy superintendent, assistant superintendent, and coordinator and/or director. The leaders provided details for instances such as birth order, community involvement, family dynamics as well as educational and professional attainments as noted characteristics to be examined. These specifics, in addition to other structures of leadership styles, such as strategies to implement processes as well as personality traits were vital in representing the totality of each leader interviewed. Shared experiences of African American women district middle space leaders were confirmed as essential elements to the existing minimal body of literature. The data gap regarding African American women in educational leadership has remained an area in need of focused attention. Alston (2005) argued, “The lived leadership experiences of African American leaders in the 21st century can facilitate a new look at the principle of leadership in education “(p. 685). While some studies have examined experiences of women as middle space leaders, literature on African American women leaders in middle space district leadership of K-12 school systems is largely non-existent.

Statement of the Problem

The central problem of this study is nested in exploring the experiences of African American women as they navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems. There are numerous doctoral dissertations examining female superintendents which explore the successes and the challenges of the position. The writings within the journey to superintendency, the middleness, remain unstudied. Middle space leadership proves to be quite challenging as it is constructed for the person to be a go-between within the organizational structure. In addition to

being the go-between person in the organization, middle space leaders are often tasked with overwhelming responsibilities without ample training. Adams-Dunford et al. (2019) stated, “As organizations became more complex, mid-level managers assumed additional responsibilities and tasks, but individuals are often not well prepared as they ascend into the role of mid-level manager” (p. 30). Nevertheless, those who enter the space come prepared to tackle any requirements set before them. In some cases, the middle space leader may be more than qualified to lead the system as the superintendent; consequently, they choose to remain in a director, coordinator, or assistant superintendent position.

Olson (2019) noted, “Although women have made significant leadership advances in the last two decades, less than a quarter of the 14,000 school districts in the United States are led by women” (p. 24). Considering industry and educational entities who proclaim to seek women for leadership positions, especially women of color, it would be in the best interest of industry and academia to gain a comprehensive perspective of this subgroup. The number of women qualified to lead a school system outnumber men; nonetheless, the women who are granted such a prestigious position are not reflected in school systems across the country. Women who are qualified to lead have overwhelmingly remained in spaces lower than the superintendent, yet above school level administrators. Keller (1999) as cited in Tillman and Cochran (2000) noted, “Although 51% of the U.S. population is female and 75% of teaching positions are held by women, women represent only about 12% of school superintendents” (p.44).

The quandary has remained, women are credentialed to lead, experienced to lead, yet very few women are given the opportunity to lead. Challenges such as networking, mentoring and the gender gap in leadership positions have remained barriers for women. Being able to create connected circles to gain access into leadership positions is a hurdle for most women,

particularly African American women. To increase support as women journey to and through middle space on to the superintendency, organizations must arrange support systems. Montz and Wanat (2008) suggested “Women with potential as leaders would be identified and supported throughout their careers. Structured training (particularly about negotiating), professional development opportunities, and mentors would replace the missing network ties that prohibit many women from accessing the superintendency” (p. 45). Without building networks or forming connections with persuasive people for a leadership position, women are less likely to be considered as primary candidates. Moreover, women have been more reluctant to view networking as a necessary skill to obtain a position. Unfortunately, in the absence of networking opportunities, women have remained outside the leadership circle.

The studies which have attempted to uncover the journey of African American women leaders have barely touched the surface of how the lived experiences of the individuals may have contributed to or stifled professional growth. The fullness of African American women’s overall experiences, such as family and religious traditions, community involvement, hobbies, music selections, sororities, and others, are rarely addressed. Collins (1986) proclaimed, “A good deal of the Black female experience has been spent coping with, avoiding, subverting, and challenging the workings of this same white male insiderism” (p. s26). Therefore, the other experiences which make up the African American experiences are shielded. This shield has resulted in a camouflaged African American woman defined by the societal norms of leadership.

The experiences by which African American women function as district level middle space leadership has demonstrated to be worthy of study. The voiced life stories provided a roadmap for African American women who have contemplated district level leadership. The completion of the study expressed the necessity of collaboration for African American women in

middle space district leadership. The examined journey of these leaders addressed a gap in understanding related to the experiences and the navigations of experiences of African American women as K-12 district leaders.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study explored the experiences by which African American women experience and navigate middle space district leadership in K-12 school systems. Study results exhibited intricacies of middle space leadership through the eyes of African American women district leaders. The study is designed to address two questions:

1. How do African American women experience district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems?
2. How do African American women navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems?

Methods

The experiences of African American women in district middle space leadership have perplexed the researcher for quite some time. The researcher, who identifies as an African American woman and currently works in district middle space leadership, remains curious about experiences of fellow African American women in district middle space leadership. The study incorporated the conceptual framework of middle space leadership as well as the theory of Black feminist thought.

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), “qualitative research includes detailed descriptions of the study and clearly expresses the participants’ voices” (p. 56). This approach is contrasted to the quantitative methods which have been used to test theories, predict results, and measure differences among two or more groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bloomberg and Volpe

also noted “qualitative research seeks to establish credibility and dependability and is concerned with the issue of transferability; that is, how and in what ways the findings of a particular study might apply or be useful in other similar contexts” (p. 56). Due to the purpose of the study being exploratory and focused on the lived experiences of participants, a qualitative design was deemed appropriate.

Using qualitative methodology, the researcher conducted life story interviews to explore how African American women experience and navigate district middle space leadership.

Life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a guided interview by another. (Atkinson, 1998, p. 8)

This method was implemented in correlation with the conceptual framework of middle space leadership of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993). Each characteristic of the middle space leadership framework was addressed in the interview process. The sections included the following: passages, challenges, location, tasks, roles, and mentoring relationships. Narratives were analyzed based on the varied stages of the participants’ careers.

Categories

The exploration has been organized in three distinct categories: novice, veteran, and former district middle space leaders. The first category, novice middle space district leaders, are African American women with the experience of retaining the position(s) for less than three years. The second category, veteran middle space leaders, are African American women with the experience of retaining the position for four or more years. Lastly, the third category, former middle space district leaders, are African American women who retained the position for a minimum of three years and have exited the position. The stories of each category (novice,

veteran, and former district middle space leaders) were captured through life story interviews, transcribed, coded, and described in narrative form. Consequently, the study provided a deeper understanding of individual experiences as narrated by study participants. The collection of narratives furnished insight to the way in which African American women experience and navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems.

Participants

The participants, African American women in middle space leadership positions, were selected through purposeful sampling. The leaders were chosen in correlation to their experience as district middle space leaders in public school systems, credentialed with Administration Certification, and identified as an African American woman. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) noted “the logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight of the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 148). Alabama’s State Department of Education (ALSDE) Directory 2020-2021 was utilized to identify African American women in district middle space leadership. Leaders with titles such as director, assistant superintendent, deputy superintendent, and coordinator were considered for the study. District middle space leaders were also identified purposefully through participation in selected groupings. These groupings were selected based on roles within central offices throughout K-12 school systems of Alabama. Such groupings included but were not limited to the following: curriculum and instruction coordinators, special education coordinators, federal program coordinators, professional development coordinators, and technology directors. Former middle space leaders were known due to the researcher’s insider positionality and personal relationships.

Assumptions

Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) described assumptions to be statements which reflected what the research holds to be true at the initial stages of the study. The authors also note that assumptions are statements upon which conclusions can be drawn from details of the research. Based on the race, gender, and experiences of the researcher, three primary assumptions were made regarding this study. First, in many cases, African American women in K-12 district middle space leadership are not granted appropriate resources to advance the area which they are charged to facilitate. A prime example of this claim can be seen in the lack of human resources within the department to carry out crucial duties. This assumption was formed as a result of insider positionality and familiarity with African American women district middle space leaders. Second, African American women in K-12 district middle space leadership operate in a zone of ambiguity (twixt and between) regarding intentions of the superintendent and operational desires of the school administrators. Third, although scheduled quarterly meetings hosted by the Alabama Department of Education may be deemed informal networking opportunities, there is a significant lack of intentional, purposeful mentoring for African American women in K-12 district middle space leadership. If a mentoring relationship is formed, it is negotiated between the leaders at their own leisure.

Delimitations

The study was narrowed to specifically explore the experiences and navigation of those experiences voiced by African American women district middle space leaders only. To focus the study even more, the categories of study participants were also streamlined to the following boundaries: novice (one to three years) veteran (a minimum of four years) and former (a minimum of three years). An additional delimitation includes the required certification,

credentialed with administrative certification. Additional subgroups were dismissed to ensure the select phenomena of African American women district middle space leaders were captured. As opposed to limitations, delimitations are within the researcher's scope of control (Simon, 2011). Delimitation of this study included not exploring African American women in private school middle space district leadership positions. Although the experiences of African American women in private district middle space leadership positions are worthy of study, the research would be better served analyzing interview data from public school middle space district leaders. The study was narrowed to African American women who currently work in or who have formerly worked in district middle space leadership positions. The researcher chose to narrow the study to this subgroup due to personal lived experiences and curiosity of others who occupy a similar space. The final delimitation involved the elimination of an alternative methodology. Quantitative methodology was considered for the study; however, to appropriately capture participants' lived practices regarding their experiences and navigation of district middle space leadership, the researcher opted to refrain from using the method.

The researcher chose qualitative research methods to represent and present the participants' individual and collective voice(s) as African American women district middle space leaders. The key aims of this study were to explore experiences and navigation strategies unique to African American women in district middle space leadership regarding their journey to, within, and beyond their position(s).

The researcher anticipates the results of this study to be used for mentoring and sustaining other African American women as they matriculate in and through district middle space leadership positions in K-12 school systems. Examining the responses rendered through life story questioning ensured a more in-depth analysis of the participants experiences and

navigation within the position(s). The researcher considered that components of each participants' school system, such as personnel and financial resources, yielded varying responses. Throughout the research and discovery for this study, the researcher did not attempt to create sweeping generalizations for African American women district middle space leaders. The researcher was intentional in honoring the authentic experiences and navigation of those experiences of each participant.

Limitations

The scope of the research involved collecting qualitative data using in-depth life story interviews. The life story interview protocol aligned questions to experiences of novice, veteran, and former middle space leaders. The findings of qualitative studies are potentially specific to a particular perspective and not transferable to other contexts (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The scope of this study involved African American women district middle space leaders in Alabama K-12 public school systems. The leaders agreed to participate voluntarily and confidentially. This exploration is not exempt from limitations. As noted by Cooper and Schlinder (2006), "All research studies have limitations, and the sincere investigator recognizes that readers need aid in judging the study's validity" (p. 534). The limitations of a study help identify any areas of potential weakness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The limitations also reflect study conditions beyond the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). Significant limitations of the present study included the honesty of participants during their interviews as well as how liberal they were in information elaboration. The limitation included time constraints by the participants. The time constraints involved the number of participants with time available to participate in the study.

Significance

The researcher anticipated the significance of this study to present a voice to district middle space leadership from the experiences of African American. This voice is necessary to ignite other scholars to explore the role of district middle space leadership as a critical entity of K-12 school system leadership teams. The research is significant to bring forth the many challenges, obstacles, and barriers faced by African American women while simultaneously celebrating their successes. The significance of gathering voices of African American women is monumental for all ethnic groups; however, it is most pertinent to African American women K-12 leaders. There is a void of information being shared to adequately express the lived experiences of African American women. Regarding the value of sharing in a matter which invokes the mind and heart of other African American women, Evans-Winters (2019) begged the question:

Can my godmother understand what it is I am arguing and believe the argument is worth sharing? Can my sister hear my voice when she reads my stories, narratives, and musings, or would she proclaim that I am full of it and I have taken on someone's else's voice and words? Finally, could my daughter be able to explain my observations and interpretations and recommendations to a policymaker? (p. 24).

Ultimately, by sharing the lived experiences of and about African American women as district middle space K-12 leaders, the researcher envisions the study as a point of reference for African American women district middle space leaders. The study is support for leaders who may experience isolation, anxiety, overwhelming workloads, self-doubt, and lack of fulfillment in navigating the position. There has remained a gap in

the literature regarding leadership for district middle space in K-12 school systems. Moreover, peer reviewed literature regarding the subgroup of African American women in the space of district leadership continues to be scant. Collins (2009) argued that “a dialogical relationship characterized Black women’s collective experiences and group knowledge. On both the individual and 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” (p. 34).

Finally, the researcher anticipated the significance of the study as one to provide guidance for those in the novice and veteran phases of their middle space careers as well as rejuvenation for the leaders to continue using their imagination, creativity, and curiosity in actualizing goals as African American women district middle space leaders. The findings of this study contributed to the framework of middle space leadership with an emphasis on African American women in district middle space leadership roles.

Definition of terms

African American. A term that describes an American citizen of African descent.

Black feminist thought. “A specialized thought which reflects the distinctive themes of African American women’s experiences. The core themes of work, family, sexual politics, motherhood, and political activism which rely on paradigms that emphasize the importance of intersecting oppressions in shaping the U.S. matrix of domination” (Collins, 2009, p. 269).

Distributed Leadership. Asserting leadership regarding the following: leadership tasks, leadership functions, task enactment, social distribution of task enactment and situational distribution of task enactment (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamon, 2004).

Former Middle Space Leader. A middle space leader who retained the position for a minimum of three years.

Mansplained. “When a man condescendingly explains something to a woman (that she knows more about than him), and then opens the room for sharing” (Olson, 2019, p. 25).

Mentor. A person who guides, trains, and supports a less skilled or experienced person called a novice, mentee, or protégé (Hill & Ragland, 1995).

Mentoring. The concept of acting as a guide to assist others in defining and understanding their own goals and pursue them successfully (Zachary & Fischler, 2009).

Middle Leader. Those leaders between senior management and lower-level workers who hold middle positions (Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher, & Turner, 2007)

Middle Management. A term synonymous with middle space leader; those who work in middle management and help make decisions (Cawthorne, 2010); those who act as a bridge and buffer between upper-level management and lower-level workers (Clegg & McAuley, 2005); both leader and follower (Kerry, 2003).

Middle Space. The location of managers between that which is above and that which is below; the space that pulls a manager between two levels in the organization (Oshry, 1993).

Middle Space K-12 District Leader. A term synonymous with middle manager and used to refer to someone who occupies a position in middle space at the district level between the Superintendent of a school system and school level administrators.

Middle Space Leader. A term synonymous with middle manager and used to refer to someone who occupies a position in middle space between upper management and lower-level workers.

Middle Space Leader (Former). District level coordinator, director, deputy superintendent, and or assistant superintendent who retained the position for a minimum of three years

Middle Space Leader (Novice). District level coordinator, director, deputy superintendent, and or assistant superintendent who has retained the position for less than five years.

Middle Space Leader (Veteran). District level coordinator, director, deputy superintendent, and or assistant superintendent who has retained the position for six or more years.

Race. The socially constructed meaning attached to a variety of physical attributes, including but not limited to skin and eye color, hair texture, and bone structures of people.

Superintendent. The chief executive officer of a school district employed by a board of directors.

Organization

This study includes six chapters which explores the mechanisms by which African American women experience and navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school

systems. An introduction of the study including the overall context, background, and components are included in Chapter 1. A review of related literature is discussed in Chapter 2. The methodology, design of the study, participants, and role of researcher accompanied by data collection and analysis are presented in Chapter 3. A detailed analysis of the participants' experiences is rendered in Chapter 4a. A summation of the participants' navigational strategies regarding experiences is presented in Chapter 4b followed by a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Leadership or management brings with it varying levels of accomplishments and challenges. Those who choose to work in either area understand there will be times when both ends of the spectrum are represented. This chapter delves into the aspect of middle space leadership in K-12 education. An overview of African American women as leaders is presented in the chapter. Also, the intersection of African American and woman as it relates leadership is discussed. Leaders who work between upper- and lower-level management are typically referred to as middle managers. Cawthorne (2010) offered a summary which captured the essence of middle space:

Middle managers, those who work in the middle tier of management, are positioned to influence decision making, Unlike top leaders, they are close to individuals who perform technical specialists' work. They report back to senior management about staff questions and concerns, as well as on the progress of frontline staff on the implementation of key strategic and organizational goals (p. 151).

To achieve success through and within the aforementioned summary of middle space leadership, building and sustaining relationships is fundamental. The challenge of building and sustaining relationships, however, can be multifaceted. For example, Uytterhoeven (1989) alludes to this challenge as a threefold task. The author describes the relationship process as, "Managers act as subordinate, equal, and superior: upward, they relate to their bosses as subordinates-they take orders; downward, they relate to their teams as superiors-they give orders; laterally, they often relate to peers in the organization as equals" (p. 137). Middle managers have been acknowledged as the connector between the decision makers and the implementation team of

organizations. Both tasks are aligned to the structure of the position. The structure has caused the middle space to be filled with ambiguity, consistent change, yet rewarding. K-12 public school district middle space leaders operate as the cornerstone and connectors while leading, partnering and assisting in multiple areas of the school system.

This study explored two central questions. How do African American women experience district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems? How do African American women navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems? The literature review for this study was divided into four sections which included a historical context of middle space leadership, a conceptual framework (middle space leaders), supporting theory (Black feminist thought), and intersectionality.

Middle Space Leadership

Industry and corporate settings have defined leadership between upper and lower management as middle space. McAuley (2003, as cited in Clegg and McAuley, 2005) offered the following bulleted inspection of early 1970s to 1980s management literature. The literature yielded four dominant discourses in the development of the middle manager:

- The early 1970s: Middle management represents the core organizational values. Middle managers become agents of organizational control. The middle manager is depicted as the buffer between essentially transient senior management and the essentially instrumental orientation of the employee.
- The late 1970s to early 1980s: The nadir of middle management, the middle manager as essentially a self-interested agent of control. The middle manager is essentially redundant, a layer of noise between the vision and strategies of senior management, and the to-be-empowered employee.

- The mid-1980s: The middle manager as a key actor in the development of the managerial discourse. The middle manager is seen as a “corporate bureaucrat” and agent of organizational control.
- The 1980s: The middle manager is conceptualized as transmitter of core strategic values through the enactment of the role as mentor, coach, and guide. The middle manager is understood to be a repository of organizational knowledge who exercises essentially benign control through personal but organizationally located wisdom (p.22).

The discourse of the district middle space leader mirrors a combination of leadership discourses. Each phase is represented throughout the tenure of district middle space leadership. These roles require flexibility of the middle space leader as they work to collaboratively guide the district. Spillane et al. (2004) suggested that mid-level central office staff occupy a strategic position between the innovations unfolding inside the schools, within and across different central office departments, and beyond (p. 3). The position has required middle space leaders to operate simultaneously as thinkers, planners, and doers within and across departments. This coordinated effort of middle space leaders often contributed to a strategic workflow for the organization. Henning and Jardim (1977, as cited in Wentling, 2003) argued, “The middle manager’s job is to coordinate with counterparts in other functional areas to see that the work of his or her own group or department is related as effectively as possible to the immediate objectives and operations of the enterprise; and it is primarily for this broad task that he or she is held responsible” (p. 313).

The broad coordination of efforts by middle space leaders can be observed across the organization as middle space leaders initiate and implement activities. Kerry (2003) defined middle managers as “both leaders and ‘followers,’ though they do not construct themselves using

this latter descriptor. Whatever conceptual framework bounds their work in their own thinking, it is not delineated by followership” (p. 14). Middle space leaders must, therefore, be prepared to complete tasks as assigned by their supervisors while deploying strategies to address the vision and mission of the organization. Middle space leaders in K-12 school systems are positioned to have routine interactions with varying groups. The interactions provide a lens into areas of concern and often compliment the middle space leader’s role in interactions to orchestrate a continuous flow of information from the district to stakeholders. The flow of information is filtered by the middle space leader to the superintendent, ensuring only relevant information is relayed. Likewise, information is filtered by the middle space leader from the superintendent to the stakeholders. This ensures only necessary, relevant information is delivered to the appropriate groups. The operations of middle space leaders have proven to be bridges between various positions within the organization. Cawthorne (2010) declared “Frontline empowerment also has the potential to enhance communication, coordination, and accountability through the middle of the organization, such empowerment often makes the difference in how well the desired change is achieved” (p. 151).

Communities within the organization have been built through various skill sets of middle managers. One primary skill set of middle space leaders is providing supervision over multiple areas within an organization. Busher et al. (2007) stated, “Middle leaders are responsible for supervising the work of groups of other people within an institution” (p. 405). Middle space leaders have operated in the spirit of collectivism. Investing in strategies and or tactics to keep members within the organization focused on immediate and long-term goals is a primary responsibility of middle space leaders. These leaders are empowered to take charge of designated areas while being cognizant of the limitations of the position. Although the middle space leader

operated in a betwixt and in between state, there remains a level of applied authority in the role of district level middle space leadership.

Applied versus delegated authority illustrates the need for more clarity and less ambiguity in the role, which is particularly unique to middle space leaders. In some cases, titles associated with varying middle space roles have been established based on the structure of the organization to aide applied authority. Armstrong (2017) explained the titles associated with middle space managers in district level educational positions may consist of assistant superintendent, deputy assistant superintendent, directors, and coordinators. Large urban and mid-level school systems have typically assigned the title of assistant superintendent or deputy assistant superintendent to those in middle space leadership, yet middle space district leaders' roles assigned in small, rural school systems have maintained titles such as director and/or coordinator.

Ultimately, the district middle space leader (director, coordinator, supervisor, deputy superintendent and/or assistant superintendent) has remained an extension of the superintendent and is charged with supporting the vision and mission of the school system. Though these positions may operate as conduits for information between the superintendent and building level administrators, Floyd and Woodridge (1994) note that “middle managers are not objective channels of data. They saturate information with meaning through personal evaluation and explicit advice. Events are likely to be reported as “threats” or “opportunities” (p.50). To provide leadership in areas, middle space leaders are tasked with finding common ground in the implementation process. Floyd and Woodridge (1994) reiterate that middle managers contribute greatly to strategy implementation by translating organizational actions through monitoring individual performance, developing methods to achieve a strategy, and taking the necessary adjustment to ensure alignment between the strategy and the expected behavior. Depending on

the level of involvement, a school system's action may have an overreaching effect in community proceedings. In such cases, a middle space leader may operate as community spokesperson for the school system initiative. Burch and Danley (1980) stated that middle managers end up "serving as host, presiding, performing ceremonial duties, speaking at routine functions, and representing the system at community or other events" (p. 636). With every function, the middle space leader has remained a consistent space within the district, school, and community at large.

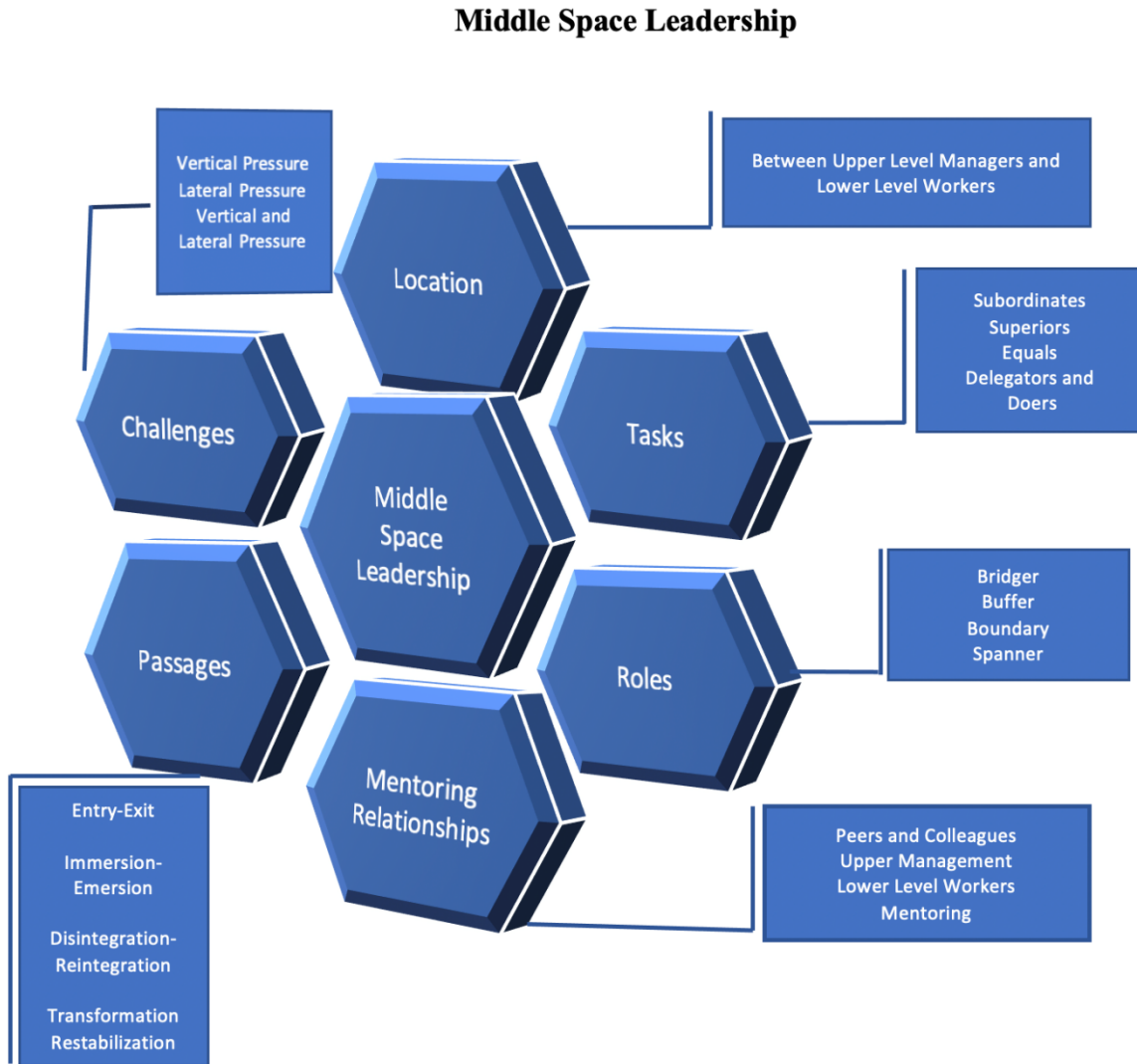
Conceptual Framework: Middle Space Leadership

The conceptual framework for this study has been derived from Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework. The middle space leadership framework includes the following: passages, challenges, location, roles, tasks, and mentoring relationship. Additional categories of interest highlighted within this study include brokering, boundaries, distributed leadership, managing stress, and communication. Each characteristic and supplemental categories have offered mechanisms by which middle space district leaders experience and navigate the space.

The experience and the navigation of those experiences are analyzed in particularly as African American women operate in district middle space leadership. The graphic below depicts the six characteristics utilized to inform the life story interview protocol.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework: Middle Space Leadership (Armstrong, 2009 and Oshry 1993 cited in Armstrong, 2017)



Divisions of Middle Space Leadership Framework

Passages

The journey of a middle space leadership has been steeped in written and unwritten interactive rules. Noted positive interactive rules and steps are as follows: being consistently

helpful, being knowledgeable, and being a bridge between the schools and district. Middle space leaders who have pressed through and gained vital experience have gained increased courage within the role. Women leaders have found that coupling the experience with courage is necessary to matriculate to higher roles in middle space leadership. Treasure et al. (2013) suggested, “Having courage means taking the initiative to do something new despite the natural hesitancy that fear may produce” (p. 55). This courage has revealed itself as the educator matriculated from classroom teacher to building level administrator then to district level administrator. The upward mobility of professional progress ensures possibilities are being pursued even at the cost of the goal being delayed. Treasure et al. (2013) claimed, “Women who are successful in achieving their career goals do so because they are willing to take chances when opportunity knocks, even if success is not guaranteed” (p. 55).

The middle space passage has proven to be one of great patience. Women district leaders have dealt with unique obstacles in upward mobility. Oakley (2000) noted “Women in middle management often cite a lack of performance-based feedback as compared with their male colleagues, which may serve as an additional obstacle for further promotion” (p. 323). Whatever the trek to the position may be, the experiences gained through each position will be added to the leadership toolbox as district level tasks take center stage. Conversely, the other side to the passage involved the restraints and unwritten rules associated with the position; therefore, understanding the powers at play in the district office support the passage phase of the role. As middle space leaders matriculate from one area to the next, the process of effective distribution of information from upper- and lower-level leaders promotes credibility in the role of the leader. Burch and Danley (1980) asserted, “Supervisors are responsible for keeping up to date through reading, attending professional meetings, and being available to people who need information”

(p. 636). Middle space leaders who remain constant consumers are keenly aware of current research which allows the district to be well informed. The leader's ability to manage the oversight of projects and convey knowledge about numerous areas within the organization is fundamental to the district. Moreover, when middle space leaders gain expert knowledge in a certain area, resources and strategies can be funneled to areas with more intention. Grove (2002) explained, "The expertise of central office members in specific curriculum areas also enables them to serve as consultants and to develop curriculums and instruction strategies that encompass national standards and research-based practices" (p. 47). Gaining more knowledge in various capacities assists the middle space leader in flourishing from novice to veteran leader. The passage to and through middle space leadership has been revealed as one of discipline and commitment to the position. With each passage, the leader has gained knowledge and experiences which will assist in central office leadership.

Challenges

Challenges for middle space leaders have presented a varied set of nuances. The middle space leader understands the ranking order which permeates the organization. The vertical aspect of middle space leadership comes into play when the superintendent and building level administrators are at odds regarding actions or other issues. As the middle space leader remains engaged with matters related to central office colleagues, the lateral aspect of the role is addressed. Typically added layers such as gender and race ensure additional challenges. The journey to district level leadership positions proves to be delayed and laborious for women. Young and McLeod (2001) argued, "A combination of a woman's aspiration, experiences, and responses to those experiences is what ultimately determines her decision to enter or not to enter educational administration" (p. 469). Women are faced with the timeless balance of moving

forward or standing still to gauge the aftershocks of their responses as well as commentaries regarding their aspirations. Women are often regarded as aggressive when they add to the conversation during meetings whereas their male counterparts presenting the same information are considered strong leaders. These areas of deliberation have caused some women to second guess advancing to various leadership positions; therefore, remaining in tier I positions within the organization. In contrast, other women have decided to ascend to the next level of leadership despite the challenges.

Location

The role of a K-12 district middle space leader requires deliberate attention to the location within the organization. Leaders who work between upper level and lower-level structures in K-12 public schools express the role as somewhat of a balancing act. Kerry (2003) declared, “Middle managers are bridges between senior managers and the rest, regardless of profession. This “bridging” activity is not construed in terms of “followership” (p. 15). The location requires district middle space leaders to be leaders as well as followers. The validation period can be difficult for anyone in the position; however, trials associated with African American women seem to be more challenging.

Salih and Doll (2013) asserted, “Middle managers hold unique positions within organizations providing them with the opportunity to influence an organization’s strategic activities” (p. 33). Middle managers are positioned to be a liaison between senior level and lower-level employees. As liaisons, the middle managers proceed with implied authority to support the vision of the district. The navigation of the printed, spoken, and understood dynamics of the organizational structure as middle space leaders prove to be challenging. Within the location of middle space leadership, there is an expectation to change and to improve the

organization. Conversely, leaders in the middle space are also faced with a sense of loyalty to the working structures of the organization. The optimal approach to these tenets is finding a resolve between the two in the location. Bryant and Stensaker (2011) stated, “Expecting middle managers to develop behaviors associated with change leaders while also expecting them to remain loyal implementers suggests that organizations may be reinforcing the middle management dilemma and placing new, and possibly unfair, expectations upon individuals” (p. 357). The structure of sense making morphs to a systematic level of problem-solving tactics used throughout the district. To address problem-solving in middle space leadership, flexibility to act as a conduit between the central office and school levels remains essential to the success of organizations. Kerry (2003) stated, “Middle managers seem to be more self-conscious of themselves as leaders of subordinates than in any followership role, however construed” (p. 15).

To enforce top-down strategies as requested in some cases and mandated in others, middle space leaders operate in the framework of trailblazer and supporter. The location of middle space leaders provides opportunity to utilize political power to challenge various structures within the system. To do so, middle leaders find commonalities between groups and develop structures to ensure partnerships are developed. Burch and Danley (1980) asserted, “Supervisors are to develop links with people in significant positions, both within and outside the system” (p. 636).

The give and take of the political influence are necessary for middle space leaders to be admired. With garnered influence, middle space leaders speak directly to district issues with strategies to bring resolution. Overall, if properly navigated, the location affords middle space leaders with the opportunity to operate fluidly between upper-level and lower-level employees.

The act of this navigation is done while creating plans for effective changes throughout the district.

Tasks

Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) suggested “Middle managers, are charged with performing tasks which will yield higher outcomes: (a) defining tactics and developing budgets for achieving a strategy, (b) monitoring the performance of individuals and subunits and (c) taking corrective measures when behavior falls below expectations” (p. 48). A developed sense of urgency to complete tasks proves paramount to thrive in the role of middle space leadership. Coordinated efforts to systemize and coordinate resources are essential in task completion, as well. These efforts are useful in developing partnerships within the organization. Collaborated structures involving those in a superior role, equal role, and subordinate role to the middle space leader are crucial to provide adequate human resources to organizational members.

Within the scope of clerical routines as a middle space manager, the need to call stakeholders to task, plan objectives, and execute program goals are dependent on the leader who holds just-in-time information. As middle space leaders navigate various roles in the space, managing relevant information is conveniently assigned to them. Task completion around shared vision has demonstrated to be fundamental to the success of the school district.

Roles

One of the primary responsibilities of a middle space leader is to exist within the varied roles of the organization. Middle space leadership demands flexibility and adaptability. The middle space leader acts as a bridge and buffer from one circumstance to the next. Within the role as one who bridges and buffers, the middle space leader also provides boundaries where necessary in the organization. The varied roles cause ambiguity within the space which is

challenging as district middle space leaders transition from school level administrative roles to the roles of district leaders. Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) claimed, “Just like the ancient Roman god Janus, who had two faces, allowing him to face two opposite ways at once, middle managers have to face two directions and deal with both superiors and subordinates” (p. 129).

Another defined role of the middle space leader has been team player. Effective middle space leaders work in conjunction with multiple teams to gain new perspectives for implementing district goals. Organizing teams to lead change requires respect, strategic planning, and consistency. Tewel (1995) suggested, “Discussing ideas, discovering new ways of thinking, and experimenting under conditions of trust and respect enhance commitment and increase receptivity to new viewpoints (p. 68). Through team building, effective middle space leaders are afforded numerous opportunities to showcase their skillsets as team leaders and team players dependent upon the task at hand.

The role of middle space leaders also requires clear communication to ensure relevant information is shared within the central office, to schools, and to the community to advance the initiatives of the district. Cocks (2010) maintained, “Effective leadership means being able to speak the language of strategy as well as the language of operations. Leaders are able to develop, receive and interpret strategic plans” (p. 264). Accurate dissemination of such plans from the middle space leader is imperative. The process of effective distribution of information from the middle space leader to the upper- and lower-level aspects of the organization promotes credibility in the role of the leader. Middle space leaders relay continuous communication practices which enhances school level to district level correspondences. Effectively utilizing intellectual resources gained from conferences, regional meetings, and university partnerships to furnish information to school level administrators as well as to the superintendent is a major role

of middle space leadership. The ability to communicate such pedagogy and knowledge by the middle space leader is critical to the success of the district. Burch and Spillane (2004) claimed, “Mid-level central office staff emerge as pivotal actors in the two-way translation and communication between top district leadership and school-level staff around instructional initiatives” (p. 3). The middle space leader is utilized in the role as a communicator in addition to their other various responsibilities. As middle space leaders are communicating with varied stakeholders, it is ever so important they maintain a consistent structure of communication with the superintendent. Effective leaders understand the essence of communication. Cocks (2010) asserted, “Effective leaders know when and how to manage upwards to negotiate resources and provide candid feedback” (p. 264). Middle space leaders use communication to implement observation tools which ensures collaboration between the schools and district. Middle space leaders interested in the creation of healthy mentoring relationships have employed the practice of effective communication. Such practices have yielded positive results for the organization and the middle space leader. Effective communication is required to establish oneself as a known leader in the organization. The creation of open communication streams has been aligned to the middle space leader. Cocks (2010) maintained, “Open and direct feedback and communication systems are critical. People need to achieve individually and in their teams, measure performance against their targets, provide feedback on that performance and reward based on the results” (p. 264).

Mentoring Relationships

Middle space leaders assigned mentoring duties or who have experienced being mentored fair better in the role. Mentoring supports much of what is currently known about how individuals learn, including the socially constructed nature of learning and the importance of

experimental, situated learning experiences (Bova, 2000). K-12 school systems as well as industry invest in mentoring efforts for employee retention and strengthening their organizations. Companies realize the organizational benefit of supporting and developing young talent and are establishing formal mentoring programs which ensure that promising minorities have better opportunities to succeed (Jenkins, 2005). In fact, Kovanatska (2014) claimed, “More than 70% of Fortune 500 and private companies use mentoring to attract, develop and retain talent as well as boost productivity” (p. 4).

Yet, finding or being assigned to a mentor is often a difficult task. Difficulties arise because of organizational structures as well as the challenges of identifying candidates willing to serve as mentors. In addition to identifying mentoring candidates, pairing a mentor of the same gender and race can be taxing, as well. This unique challenge is faced by women of color often. The lack of mentoring support is attributed to women of color feeling a lack of acceptance. Bova (2000) asserted, “The protégé can learn the skills of leadership by observing and emulating the mentor, and has the opportunity to learn from not only his/her own experiences, but those of the mentor as well” (p. 7).

Developing an authentic mentoring relationship with comfort and relevance to both mentor and mentee is crucial. The feeling of isolation is contradictory to building the required relationships in middle space leadership. Middle space leaders who work with role models, regardless of whether those relationships are assigned or naturally developed relationships, tend to fair better regarding cultivating sustainable work relationships. The risk is lessened by ensuring supportive networks are formed. These supportive networks allow middle space leaders to shape a team of advocates to form a high trust organization. To build necessary mentoring structures. Treasure et al. (2013) suggested, “Support the building of strong networks (inside and

outside the organization) by providing access to senior leaders through networking lunches, guest speaking segments, and other events” (p. 54). Creating and sustaining a mentoring relationship and being a mentor are critical to the success of middle space leaders. Studies show that women need additional support regarding courage as they climb the professional ladder. In the absence of adequate mentoring structures, women leadership in district level positions remain male dominant. Olson (2019) noted, “Whether you’ve just started your career or are the executive director, if you’re a woman, people expect you to do routine-consuming tasks that no one else wants to do” (p. 27). Adequate mentoring for middle space leaders proves useful in being selective of such tasks.

Middle space leaders benefit from being members of an established mentoring network. This action is critical in shaping leaders. Middle space leaders who join organized networks experience success. Organizations such as Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) establish mentoring networks for middle space leaders. ASCD offers conferences and workshops to broadly address women seeking or currently holding leadership positions. Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010) suggested, “Women seeking leadership positions are encouraged to align themselves with mentors who are experienced in their careers and with those who possess qualities for achieving successful outcomes” (p. 3). The act of aligning with veteran leaders in and outside of the organization is fundamental to longevity within the position. Successful middle space leaders agree that the pursuit of and connecting to a mentor may be time consuming and, in some cases, emotionally taxing, yet worth it for success in the role.

Numerous benefits unveil in forming mentoring relationships. Benefits such as idea sharing sessions, expectations of the role, and mechanisms to manage the role of middle space

leadership materialize. A significant aspect of the mentor – mentee relationship is receiving feedback and building on stumbling blocks within the role. Although giving and receiving feedback typically does not present as highlights for the mentor nor the mentee, the act in and of itself is a necessary component for success. Treasure et. al (2013) declared, “Getting feedback from others may be uncomfortable, but it’s essential to growth and development” (p. 56).

In addition to getting feedback, establishing a mentoring relationship which welcomes authentic conversations regarding life issues is paramount to effective leadership. Jenkins (2005) suggests, “The key to a real relationship is being able to talk openly and honestly about subjects like race, gender, and perception issues that may have a real effect on one’s upward mobility” (p. 86).

Furthermore, to establish mentoring within the organization, networking and circle building outside of the organization are critical. The creation of networks provides an outlet for professional learning. Supportive networks encourage perseverance in the position. These mentoring networks offer a bridge for the middle space leader to work with the upper- and lower-level operational staff members. According to Kerry (2003), “As ‘bridges’ a key concept for effectiveness is communication-they see themselves very much as the hub of that process (p. 15). Overall, organizations with stable structures around mentoring are equipped to support middle space leaders. With established networks, the organization stands to capitalize on securing and maintaining effective middle space leaders.

Expanded Overview of Middle Space Leadership

Described in the following section are elements which postulate a more comprehensive understanding of middle space leadership. These areas offer an expanded view of the activities

performed by middle space leaders and their navigation within the space. Additional categories include the following: brokering, boundary, and distributed leadership.

Brokering

Brokering represents a distinctly different way of thinking about the work of districts in instructional reform. Brokering in a central office position is primarily responsible for cultivating the exchange of information and expertise within and across schools (Burch & Spillane, 2004). The exchange remains significant in the aspect of success within the role of middle space leaders. Brokering has been used as a communication process from district to school level administrators. This process, used by middle space managers to organize, schedule, and implement district goals, strengthens K-12 alignment. The authors further explain that the exchange expands where necessary between schools and third parties and between instructional leaders working at the very top of the system (Burch & Spillane, 2004). Central office staff members helped determine how principals, teachers, and other school administrators perceive and act on district instructional reform policies.

Table 1

How Mid-Level Central Office Staff Serve as Brokers

Their Role as Brokers	Brokering Examples
<p>Tool Designer: Who translates reform agendas into tangible material for use in schools?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Create handbooks, rubrics, and evaluation protocols. *Revise or create school planning templates. *Adapt externally developed curricular materials for use within district reforms.

<p>Data Manager: Work with implementation and student outcome data to help teachers and principals use it to improve instruction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Review and provide feedback on school improvement plans. *Hold meetings to discuss test score data with school staff. *Compile student enrollment or budget data and distribute. *Monitor school compliance with requirements and regulations. *Conduct principal evaluations.
<p>Trainer and Support Provider: Design staff development and training to support instructional leadership at different levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Organize principal training in response to new agenda. *Lead workshops on best practices for teacher leaders. *Design and conduct workshops for school-based planning teams and parents.
<p>Network Builder: Create routines and practices that build or sustain connections between people who have expertise to share but little contact.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Write and participate in grants that create new partnerships for the district and for individual schools. *Help obtain information for individual school staff from other central office departments. *Organize meetings or design processes for helping school staff to share ideas and problem-solve.

Note: This table describes roles and examples of brokering (Burch & Spillane, 2004)

Brokering offers middle space leaders' opportunities to build connections and establish or re-establish relationships with the organization. As communication is garnered other personnel in the organization benefit from being in a productive, collegial work relationship. Furthermore, brokering results in focused, intentional strategies aligned to common district goals and provides for professional growth. Brokering tactics such as relationship building, implementation of goals, and professional growth leads to student achievement. Busher (2005) noted, "Middle leaders considered it important to have a clear vision, encapsulating certain educational and social values, for the development of their departments, and to project this to their colleagues" (p.143). Middle space leaders who are equipped to implement the roles as described in the

aforementioned table are well versed in a multiple areas and are better prepared to lead the district.

Boundary

The position of middle space leader remains an ever-changing and quite vast role. Middle space leaders who adhere to facets such as parameters and or boundaries of the job succeed in the role. “The middle manager is only possible in a type of organization in which positions have a margin of managerial work and operational work, where the proportion of managerial work increases with increasing responsibility within the operation of the organization” (Parera et al., 2013). Each middle space leader must be prepared to render assistance related to various tasks. Such tasks include taking charge, providing official statements, and leading a school. Burch and Danley (1980) asserted roles which fit in the boundaries of middle space leadership as “Assisting others in acquiring desired competencies, developing instructional guides and materials, conducting and planning in-service, and materials and textbook evaluations” (p. 636). Overall, as characterized in the conceptual framework of middle space leadership (Armstrong, 2009) and Oshry, 1993), the role of the middle space leader is to be a bridger, buffer, spanner, and boundary keeper of the organization. Leadership found in the position of middle space results in support for the people in the central office, school level administrators, faculty, and staff members.

Distributed Leadership

Middle space leaders are tasked with numerous areas of responsibilities. Leaders who employ the most organized, effectively communicated plans will readily admit that there is no simple way to master every area of middle space leadership. The most effective middle space leaders reference distributed leadership, otherwise known as shared leadership, team leadership,

or democratic leadership as a strategy for success. Distributed leadership practices empower middle space leaders to rely on collaborative measures to reach the district's goals. Spillane (2005) described distributed leadership as a "Product of the interactions of school leaders, followers and their situation. in this matter, first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures" (p.145). The implementation of distributed leadership practices offers opportunity for the middle space leader to advance district initiatives. Educators who function utilizing distributed leadership practices focus less upon the characteristics of the "the leader" and more upon creating a shared context for learning and developing leadership capacity. Cawthorne (2010) emphasized, "Through the dynamic exchange between top leaders and middle managers, shared leadership can shape organizational culture and the extent to which organizations effectively accomplish their missions" (p.151).

Characteristics of Distributed Leadership

Middle managers are often revered as the problem solvers, organizers, and implementation specialists. While each of these are high compliments for middle space leaders, they also have the potential to be overwhelmed within the position; therefore, the urgency to utilize distributed leadership practices is essential. The ability to lead and to follow is fundamental for middle space leaders as they employ distributed leadership strategies. To effectively deploy distributed leadership practices, the middle space leader interprets when best to delegate, where assistance is needed, and when to follow another's lead. These strategies increase the workflow of an organization. Distributed leadership practices allow capacity to lead as demonstrated by district leaders to school level administrators. The process of educator collaboration places a greater impact on the use of distributed leadership which empowers leaders to flourish in their areas of strength.

The implementation of distributed leadership strategies is fundamental to the success of middle space leadership. In middle space leadership, one must rely on upper and lower management to a streamlined approach to completing tasks. Assigned jobs and activities with appropriate implementation from middle space leaders ensures progress within the organization. Trust is required to fully implement distributed leadership practices. Focusing on means to bring more leaders into the conversation of the organization's goals is pivotal for middle space leaders because it lessens the experiences of isolation and improves the quality of middle space leaders' daily work. If utilized appropriately, time saving benefits are afforded to the middle space leaders and the entire organization. For example, distributed leadership in conjunction with system leadership practice requires a collaboration of minds to complete the work. To help with this concept, the researcher encourages scholars to ponder the thoughts of Peter Senge (1990) regarding system leadership as "Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" (p.3). This allows leaders to seek opportunities for expansion in the district and remain resilient in the process. Spillane (2005) noted, "Distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures" (p.146).

While distributed leadership practices have increased the success of organizations, African American women district middle space leaders grapple with "letting go" and allowing other people to assist them. The inner conflict to accept help as offered by sponsors or others in senior level leadership positions has interrupted the path of success for middle space leaders. Ultimately, employing distributed leadership practices maximizes the overall productivity of the organization. With increased diversity in leadership, organizations thrive. Leadership in many

instances, however, remains a male-dominated area. African American women in leadership positions remain an area in need of study and growth. The next section focuses on African American women in leadership across educational entities with a focus on K-12 education.

Women in Leadership

The mental model for leadership across the country has primarily been crafted from the perspective of White, middle-classed men. Olson (2019) noted, “Leaders that best fit the “ideal-worker norm- white, male, married, and hetero-sexual-are perceived as more attractive” (p.25). Historically, women in leadership positions have held higher levels of professional preparation than their male counterparts, yet women have received lower pay and been overlooked for advancement opportunities throughout corporations. Young and McLeod (2016) argued “Unless substantive attempts are made to understand women’s decisions to enter the field and the factors affecting their decisions, educational leadership faculty and field practitioners will be ill-prepared to recruit and support the entry of talented women into educational leadership” (p. 465). The professional trajectory for women overall has shown a longer stay in school level positions prior to ascending to the district office. Some claim that women choose this path to take time away from professional goals to focus on family goals.

All are ideas used to deny access to women as district level leaders of school systems. Underrepresentation of women in top leadership roles is not necessarily because of blatant exclusionary or discriminatory practices. Men are inadvertently favored in workplaces due to invisible barriers, cultural beliefs around gender, and workplace structures and patterns of interaction (Treasurer et al., 2013). Although discriminatory practices continue to exist, women in middle space leadership persevere in the face of challenges. These challenges have resulted in some women choosing not to apply for leadership roles, leaving leadership roles, or leaving the

profession entirely. Moreover, Treasurer et al. (2013) declared, “Worldwide, women make up roughly 61 percent of the labor market and are attaining college level degrees at a faster rate than their male counterpart. Yet women account for about 18 percent of top leadership positions in the United States” (p.52). This pattern of invisibility for women has continued to be more apparent due to hiring practices.

It is true there are attributing factors which have persisted in the passage of women to leadership positions; however, the journey and experiences of African American women are inheritably different. The experiences of Sojourner Truth in 1851 as an African American woman who witnessed attempts made to lessen the burden of her white counterpart ring true today. As African American women have pursued the path of leadership, challenges have persisted. African American women have been expected to solve the problems of the organization, yet when the opportunity has been presented to lead the organization, they are not in consideration. Alston (2012) declared, “To bring some balance to the field, the perspectives, experiences, and voices of Black women leaders are essential to the study of leadership” (p. 127). Due to the journey and experiences of many African American women in middle space district level leadership positions, Sojourner Truth’s question in 1851, “And ain’t I a woman?” has continued to be a point of contention.

African American women leaders remain a primary force behind the education of those once denied. Givens (2021) stated:

Black education was a schooling project set against the entire order of things. In its resounding assertion that black people were rational subjects-that they were not simply hands without a head (captive laborers with no capacity for reason)-black education has been a persistent

disruption to the known world instituted through racial chattel slavery.

(p.13)

Through extreme adversities, African American women have kicked against this assertion and continue to educate, lead, and advise the leaders of tomorrow Jones (1937, as cited in Krause, 2003) discussed the establishment of the Jeanes Supervisors. Anna T. Jeanes, a Pennsylvania Quaker, organized the Negro Rural School Fund, or Jeanes Fund, to assist Black schools in the South. Jones stated:

The Anna T. Jeanes Foundation was to be used solely toward the maintenance and assistance of rural, community and country schools for Southern Negroes and not for the use or benefit of large institutions, but for the purpose of rudimentary education as hereinbefore referred to and to promote peace in the land and good will among men. (p.192)

The Jeanes Supervisors of the early 1900s served in the capacity of modern-day district middle space leaders. Jeanes' teachers served as "black assistant supervisors," essentially acting as county superintendents of African American School. Krause (2003) further explained the role of the Jeanes' "Their duties were numerous: they visited schools, encouraged teachers to improve their instruction with new methods and aids, recruited teachers, recommended teachers for hiring, developed in-service teacher training, corrected school registers, checked final reports, and worked with committeeman" (p.201). The Jeanes supervisors represented leadership for African American teachers in time when it was most needed. Alston and Jones (2002, as cited in Alston, 2005) argued "By the mid-1950s, the SEF (Southern Education Foundation) recorded more than 500 Jeanes supervisors" (p. 680). This number of Black women leaders proved to be

beneficial to the educational development of Black communities. The presence of the Jeanes supervisors provided support for the African American faculty members and the students. The roles remain in sync with the intersectionality of the leaders. There exist perceived duties relegated to those who are women and those who are African American. The establishment of the Jeanes supervisors allowed African American women to serve their communities as role models, leaders, teachers, businesswomen, and organizers. These supervisors also served as a representation of successful, educated African American women for the people within and outside of the community.

Although the coordinated efforts of the Jeanes Supervisors yielded educational and moral support for the African American community, women continue to fight the challenge of collaboration. This is a result of reluctance to ask for and to accept assistance. For some African American women, a perceived inability to complete tasks will be rendered if assistance is sought. For that reason, many African American women leaders live in a space of constant thoughts about what others are thinking of their skills rather than who they present themselves to be. These perceptions place a veil over who the African American woman is in her skin and based on her merit. To navigate the perceptions of middle space leadership, African American women endure the majority culture or shift to assimilate to it. The art of assimilation is described by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) as shifting. The six shifting strategies may be applied by Black women as coping are as follows:

- (a) battling the myths; (b) scanning, surveying, and scrutinizing the environment;
- (c) walling off the impact of discrimination; (d) seeking spiritual and emotional support; through churches, religious communities, friends, and family members;

(c) retreating to the Black community and abiding by the home codes; and (f) fighting back. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, pp.66-67)

These six coping strategies offer a sense of network support. The networks are important and represent a safety net for African American women. Combs (2003) asserted, “The significance of informal social networks rests with the networks influence on access to valued resources offering instrumental benefits and psychosocial support to network members” (p. 393). This observation addresses the challenges of lateral and vertical pressures often experienced by African American women middle space leaders. African American women district middle space leaders grapple with “letting go” and allowing other people to assist them. The inner conflict to accept help as offered by sponsors or others in senior level leadership positions has interrupted the path of success for middle space leaders.

As scholars strive to understand leadership, there is particular interest in the way in which women present as leaders and, moreover, as African American people. This section delves into the dichotomy of the way in which African American women experience life. Also, the way in which these experiences are navigated to yield success for the leaders and the organizations they represent.

Black Feminist Thought

The theory of Black feminist thought seeks to uncover meaning, descriptions, and overarching explanations for the way African Americans make meaning of their surroundings. African American women are the leading sources to obtain this information as others may only speculate, ponder, and simply guess the ways in which African Americans experience life.

Collins (2009) explains the rationale for African American women to participate in the negotiation of information presented about African American women:

Black women intellectuals are 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, should we choose to embrace it. It is more likely for Black women, as members of an oppressed group, to have critical insights into the condition of our oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures. (p. 39)

Those who are positioned to deliver information about African American women, therefore, should do so with diligence. Scholars who choose to research, interview participants, and write about the experiences of varied groups are typically qualitative researchers. African American women qualitative researchers are situated to add autoethnographic accounts critical to Black feminist thought research. Evans-Winters (2019) claimed, “The qualitative researcher, is to add to the body of evidence that exists; to descriptively capture and illustrate nuanced differences between groups of women’s social and material conditions; and, to bring forth alternative analyses for referencing gender and racial oppression” (p. 18). The differences experienced by an African American woman are multifaceted in regards to her Caucasian female counterpart. These differences may be interpreted in negative nuanced ways by the majority culture; whereas, if questioned about differences, perhaps an honest dialogue to refute the interpretation will ensue. Alston (1999) stated “Because of Black women’s work, family experiences, and grounding in African American culture...Black women as a group experience a world different from those who are not Black or female” (p. 80). An

understanding of the African American woman's different world is, therefore, vital to engaging in purposeful conversations and eventually meaningful work. Without such discourse, the majority culture may find it difficult to appreciate the experiences of the African American woman. Collins (2009) provides seven core themes of Black feminist thought. Each theme illustrates an overarching view of African American women's experiences within the themes. Collins (2009) Black Feminist Thought core themes are as follows:

1. Work, Family, and Black Women's Oppression
2. Mammie, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images
3. The Power of Self-Definition
4. The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood
5. Black Women's Love Relationship
6. Black Women and Motherhood
7. Rethinking Black Women's Activism

A review of the Black Feminist Thought core themes reveal, The Power of Self-Definition resonate with the literature review for this study because of the way African American women perceive other people's thoughts regarding their existence within or their contributions to organizations. Also, the intentions behind those perceptions are questioned as intentions to cause harm to the leader's personal or professional well-being. Collins (2009) argued:

By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to

interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects. (pp. 125-126)

Interpretations of the African American woman's reality remain flawed and unappreciated due to the resistance of those unwilling to acknowledge the strengths of the African American woman, further championing the cause for African American woman to identify and promote their aptitudes. Black feminist thought provides a medium to tout such gifts while examining the intricacies of African American women. Evans-Winters (2019) argued, "Black feminist thought is a reflection of multiple theoretical traditions, including African-centered thought, feminist theory, Marxism, sociology of knowledge, critical social theory, and postmodern theory" (p.16). Each reflection and thought reveal the complexities of African American women. Complexities become interwoven through navigation of the vast experiences as African American women strive in work sectors notwithstanding adversity. Alston (1999) contend, "Despite the barriers of race and gender, hard work and endurance have always been the foundation upon which black women have made great strides" (p.79). The strides are contingent on African American women's abilities to succeed without structures in place to support nor guide them. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) emphasized, "What the research tells us is that if you are a Black woman working in settings with few Black or few women, you take on an additional risk" (p. 156). These additional risks inform the need for the African American woman to over present for concern of being identified in negative ways; therefore, to counteract accusations, the African American woman is conditioned to work twice as hard, arrive early, stay late, and take on more responsibilities. The aforementioned actions are done to promote credibility with those who "possess the power to define" (Collins, 2009, p. 126). These work behaviors are unlike any other

group. Collins (2009) stated that Black women as a group in the United States, “live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female.” (p. 27). Unlike their Caucasian counterparts, African American women constantly prepare to work with more stress, more deadlines, heavier workloads, and continuously assigned tasks. African American women are more likely to experience unfair treatment in training, advancement, disengagement, discrimination, prejudice, and lack of psychosocial and instrumental support (Bova, 2000). The lack of training is intended to discourage African American women from making advancement in organizations; however, the need to identify as strong, credible, and accomplished out rank schemes of subjugation. Collins (2009) contends, “To learn to speak in a unique and authentic voice, Black women must jump outside the frames of the systems provided by authorities and create their own frames” (p. 110). Although African American women succeed in defining themselves as confident, skilled, and successful, the journey can be exhaustive when met with daily inquires of self-worth. Cooper (2018) pondered, “What does it look like for Black women to move freely through space when we are always confronting the precariousness of life at the intersections of race and gender, of class and mental health, of love and dreams?” (p.19). The movement to and through district middle space leadership is wrought with joys of success and anticipated pitfalls. The African American woman navigates the space between her race and gender by remaining ever mindful of those who preceded her and the cost of the journey.

Intersectionality

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? -Sojourner Truth

An authentic quest to understand the African American woman requires acknowledgement of her as a complete person...a complete person who encompasses culture,

style, intellect, graciousness, love, drive, and empathy ultimately encompassing the fullness of being African American and a woman. Jones and Shorter-Goode (2003) argued:

As a society, we know very little about the psychology of Black women, a group of 19 million people - 7 percent of the U.S. population. The way they experience the workplace, the complexities of their romantic lives, the challenges they face as mothers and grandmothers, their spiritual and religious practices, these and so many other aspects of their lives are largely unknown to the wider community. (p. 2)

The interwoven aspects of these areas are necessary to uncover the African American woman as a middle space district leader. The leader in the position presents as a multifaceted person with varying identities. Jordan-Zachery (2007) presented the question, “When you look at me, what do you see: a woman who is black or a black woman?” (p. 261). The answer to this question rests in the moment or intention of the moment in which it is initiated. Depending on the need for the organization, the response aligns. A collision of both identities articulates the uniqueness of intersectionality between gender and race.

The research of Kimberle’ Crenshaw focuses on intersectionality. The author coined the phrase intersectionality to offer a mechanism for understanding the ways that the multiple aspects of African American women identities intersect, influence one another, and compound to create unique experiences. Crenshaw (1990) stated, “I used the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences” (p. 1244). The experiences of African American women within organizations call into question common practices which are exclusive to African American women and the way in which the experiences are navigated. Collins (1989) purports,

“ Living life as Black women requires wisdom, since knowledge about the dynamic of race, gender, and class subordination has been essential to Black women’s survival” (p. 758).

Crenshaw went on to expand the idea by providing an analysis that systems of race, social class, sexuality, nationality, age, and ethnicity form mutually constituting features of social organization, shaping, in this case, Black women’s experiences and, in turn, being shaped by them. The concept is used regularly to describe the ways that societal privilege and oppression complicates different parts of our identity that are marginalized or privileged in society. Scholars Richardson and Loubier (2008) explained two reasons to study intersectionality regarding leadership. The authors claimed:

Intersectionality aims to reveal the multiple identities and personas of social actors exposing the connections between those points. Also analysis of complex social situations should not reduce understanding to a singular category; rather, it should facilitate the understanding of substantively distinct experiences from the effects of inextricably connected roles and situations. (p. 143)

The multiple identities refer to gender, class, ability, race, ethnicity, etc. In connection to the multiple identities, social actors oftentimes appear regarding the political aspects of the middle space position. The intermingled characteristics of the middle space leaders as African American women in concert with social actors offer insight to intersectionality faced by African American women. This intersectionality shaped the nuances of African American women experiences as middle space leaders in district level positions. This concept accounts for the complexity of the Black women's lived experiences, recognizing that race, class, and gender are markers of power creating intersecting lines or axes used to reinforce power relations and forms of oppression (Collins, 2009).

Byrd and Stanley (2009) noted, “Leadership through the lens of African American women leaders and included the experiences and perspectives of African American women leaders, the interlocking system of race, gender, and social class (intersectionality) entered the discussion of leadership” (p. 658). This system of intersectionality gives way for the multifaceted experiences of African American women in middle space leadership. Alston (1999) argued “because of Black women’s work, family experiences, and grounding in African American culture....Black women as a group experience a world different from those who are not Black or female” (p. 80). The African American woman’s experiences remain a constant ebb and flow dependent upon those primarily in immediate circle of supervisory or subordinate circle of influence. A glimpse into this circle reveals acts of exclusion, isolation, and dismissiveness on behalf of the majority population. Crenshaw (1989) contends, “Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men” (p. 149). Organizations with actionable steps in place to analyze the separation of gender and race to further understand African American women make strides in improving the organization overall. Jones (2016) argued “when the experiences of people of color are centered, identity complicated, and power structures unveiled, social justice and social change are promoted” (p. 30).

The overlap of being a woman and being African initiates various strategies for sustainability in the role of middle space leadership. These barriers include but are not limited to acts such as committee assignments, issues regarding equitable pay in relation to white, male counterparts, as well as fewer opportunities for professional growth (Crenshaw, 1990). Olson (2019) suggested, “You can’t grow up black or brown in America and not know you’re going to face all kinds of discrimination” (p. 25). The act of discrimination against African American

women in middle space leadership positions arise through silent cues throughout organizations. For example, the long-standing act of silencing a woman has remained a tactic to discriminate. The act of silencing during an open forum meeting proves effective in some cases depending on the power dynamics in the room. Although discrimination abounds and power dynamics persist, these components act as fuel and empower the leaders to persevere. The varied leadership styles of African American women allow them to successfully navigate situations and personnel within the organization. African American women learn to morph personal behaviors as needed to assimilate with the majority population. The leaders establish certain identities to work in concert with stakeholders in an organization. In addition to identities within the organization, the African American woman may face negotiations in family, work, and social settings. An example of such negotiation is offered through an autoethnographic account by Stacey in Jones (2009):

A mother, a wife, a woman, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a niece, a professional a student, I am who you want me to be in different environments in different places at different times, but it does not stop there. I am Christian, I am Black, I am from the south, I am middle class, I am African American, which is the first identity seen by others when I walk down the street or enter a room...So to answer the question, who am I as a person, I am all of the above to different people in different settings at different times. (p. 293)

Establishing an identity for personal and organizational goals is challenging for African American women. The challenge is primarily due to the ambiguity of existence in the position of leadership by African American women. To thrive in their own lived experiences and work in collaboration in majority environments, African American women endure a constant mental identity juggling act. A common navigation of the juggling experience is to work within the borders of a group, presumably a group of other African American women middle space leaders.

A group definition is created due to criteria which are either external or internal. External criteria are the “outside” designations. Internal criteria are those of “group identification.” The components of identification include a sense of awareness of membership, the sense that the awareness is related to some value connotations, and an emotional investment in the awareness and evaluation (Tajfel, 1982).

In this case, the external criteria rest in being African American women as district middle space leaders. The external criteria take into consideration characteristics such as hair styles, body shapes, fashion choices, tattoos, jewelry, etc. Media and various forms of literature consistently promote an external criteria of African American women to be a subgroup of people who have endured slavery, rape, unequal pay, and myriad other misfortunes. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) noted, “Black women are routinely defined by a specific set of grotesque caricatures that are reductive, inaccurate, and unfair” (p.3). The caricatures encourage and perpetuate stereotypical racism. Olson (2019) noted:

While all women are often asked (and expected) to volunteer, be sensitive, not complain, black and brown women juggle many additional archetypes: “The Strong Black Woman” or “The Office Mammy”. “I work very hard not to be the angry black woman. Because once you get that role, it is hard to get that one off of you. So, I’m very strategic. (p. 26)

The negative stereotypes of African American women remain visible in society. Collins (2009) claimed:

In U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black

women are used to justify oppression. Negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression. (p. 7)

Although negative stereotypes persist, the positive experiences of African American women work to overshadow such categorizes. Understanding the urgency to keep an outward positive image is more vital than ever for the success of African American women.

Factors for the internal criteria existent in African American women are consistent with a vast amount of time on the idea of their "identity" as a mother, sister, friend, teacher, leader, and so on. The comprehension of identities and discrimination present as an overwhelming task; however, as African American women experience success, manipulation of negative incidents become building blocks to reach their goals. As a form of navigation during unwelcoming experiences, African American woman consistently present an "all is well" stature while deliberating survival tactics. These tactics come forward based on the African American woman's identity regarding the African American she is to protect or the woman she is to protect. Moreover, does she deliberate to protect both? Intersectional scholars, Dill et al. (2007) noted that "to a large extent, intersectional work is about identity" (p. 630).

Summary

African American women continue to advance as district middle space leaders in K-12 public education school systems. This is due in large part to the leaders being unapologetic about who they are as African American and as a women. The African American leader is more visible than ever in positions of authority. With this measure of success comes the ever-present gaze of those who anticipate lack because she is African American, lack because she is female, lack because she is both; nevertheless, she prevails.

Chapter 3: Methods

Statement of the Problem

A gap in the literature regarding the experiences of women as district middle space leaders in K-12 public education systems is evident. The literature regarding the experiences of African American women in K-12 public education district middle space leadership is scarce. Harding et al. (2014) noted, “Middle managers maintain a central position in organizational hierarchies, are responsible for implementing senior management strategies, and exercise control over junior staff” (p. 1214). Literature which details this experience regarding K-12 public school systems with African American women as the center focus is scant. The journey to, within, and beyond district middle space leadership for this subgroup is worthy of study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose for conducting this qualitative study was to explore experiences of K-12 African American women in middle space district leadership. The researcher also sought to examine the navigation of experiences by African American women district middle space leaders. Information gained from this study will provide validation of experiences and assist in making meaning of work experiences. In addition to the revealed structures of middle space leadership, the study garnered an opportunity for the voices of African American women leaders to be heard as they share these experiences to assist novice district middle space leaders, veteran district middle space leaders, and upper- and lower-level administrators in K-12 school systems.

Research Questions

This qualitative study explored mechanisms by which African American women experience and navigate middle space leadership in K-12 school systems. The study seeks to

exhibit the intricacies of middle space leadership through the eyes of African American women district middle space leaders. The study is designed to answer the central questions:

1. How do African American women experience district middle space leadership?
2. How do African American women navigate district middle space leadership?

Research Design

Using qualitative methodology, the researcher conducted life story interviews to explore the mechanisms by which African American women experience district middle space leadership. The methods by which life story interviews were conducted consisted of virtual interviews. Interviews were scheduled for two sessions with forty-five minutes allotted for each session. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) noted that “qualitative research includes detailed descriptions of the study and clearly express the participants’ voices” (p. 56). The completion of life story interviews offered the researcher an in-depth view of experiences unique to each African American woman in the study. Moreover, the life story interview protocol was chosen to gain an overall perspective of the leaders. Bloomberg and Volpe went on to state that “qualitative research seeks to establish credibility and dependability and is concerned with the issue of transferability; that is, how and in what ways the findings of a particular study might apply or be useful in other similar contexts” (p. 56). The use of qualitative research provided an opportunity to examine the participant’s family dynamics and professional journey. Qualitative research is grounded in a philosophical position that is essentially constructivist in the sense that is concerned with how the complexities of the social and cultural world are experienced, interpreted, and understood, in a particular context and at a particular point in time. The intent of qualitative research is to examine a social situation or interaction by allowing the researcher to enter the world of others and to attempt to achieve a holistic understanding (Bloomberg & Volpe,

2016). The life stories rendered by each woman in this exploration proved necessary to add literature regarding experiences in middle space; precisely, to the middle space experience from the lens of African American women in K-12 leadership.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is centered on middle space leadership of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993). Oshry (2016) described middleness as “the condition in which we exist between two or more individuals or groups; these groups have differing priorities, perspectives, goals, needs and wants; and each of them exerts pressure on us to function on its behalf” (p. 3). Middle space leadership expresses an existence between two groups with endless pressure to perform.

Theory

The theory used to support the study is Black feminist thought. An examination of Black feminist thought requires a close exploration of the participants regarding K-12 work experiences. Collins (1989) purported, “Living life as an African-American woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing Black feminist thought because within Black women’s communities, thought is validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions” (p. 758). African American women as a collective community offer support to navigate structures within organizations. This community operates as sister-circles for novice and veteran middle space leaders.

Life Story Interviews

The researcher used the life story interviewing technique to gain a well round view of each participant. The interviews encouraged dialogue regarding the participant’s childhood,

family structure, educational background, professional experiences, and future goals. Atkinson (1998) offered the following explanation of life story:

A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. (p. 8)

Life story interviews were conducted utilizing themes from Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership conceptual framework. The six themes (passage, challenges, location, roles, tasks, and mentoring relationships) were crafted into a life story interview protocol. The protocol was constructed to incorporate the participants background, experiences, navigation of the theme, experiences against gender and race, and suggestions for other African American women in the space. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom to accommodate all study participants. Each interview session was audio recorded, reviewed, transcribed, and coded for commonalities.

Sampling Method, Participants, and Interview Protocols

Sampling Method

The leaders were chosen in correlation to their experience as district middle space district leaders in public school systems. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) noted, “the logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight of the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 148). The researcher’s insider positionality gave perspective on potential interview participants. The Alabama Department of Education Directory (2020-2021) was used to identify district middle space leaders by local education agencies as well as by titles held within the school system. Attendance at quarterly curriculum and instruction meetings facilitated by the Alabama Department of Education provided

opportunities to meet and interact with district middle space leaders within the region. In addition to ALSDE's curriculum and instruction meetings, Auburn University's EARIC (East Alabama Regional Inservice Center) facilitated curriculum and professional development meetings for local education agencies assigned to the region. These meetings provided opportunities for the researcher to identify potential study participants, as well.

Recruitment

The researcher called each study participant to render an official invitation to be a part of the study. After the initial phone call, an information letter was emailed to each participant. The information letter included the following: a formal invitation, an overview of the participant's involvement, risks or discomforts, participation benefits, compensation, costs of participation, withdrawal from the study, and data requirements for the study. Following the email, the researcher called each participant to schedule virtual interview sessions.

Participants

The study consisted of three distinctive categories of district middle space leaders. Each category consisted of African American women who had experience as a middle space leader in a district office of an Alabama K-12 school systems. Categories were structured as follows: novice middle space leaders (one to three years of experience), veteran middle space leaders (four or more year of experience) and former middle space leaders (a minimum of three years of experience). The use of life story interviewing was essential to capturing the essence of the participants' experiences. Moreover, this interviewing method established a sense of trust between the researcher and the participants. The urgency to share experiences for the advancement of African American scholarship and job productivity proved essential to using this interviewing method. Evans-Winters (2019) notes, "To share our stories, in oral or written form,

requires mutual trust between (1) the person sharing the story, (2) the listener of the story, (3) and the audience receiving the story” (p. 71). The essence of the research is to collect stories (experiences) by and for African American women with the intention of offering support to novice, veteran, and former middle space leaders. Evans-Winters also noted, “Our intellectual and cultural pursuits allow us to move beyond being the keepers of secrets to being scholar-activists who chose to use our secrets to instigate social and community transformation” (p. 71).

District Middle Space Interview Protocol

Passage.

1. Please share with me how you chose education as a career. Feel free to include the length of time you have been a middle space leader as well as experiences from your childhood, family dynamics, K-12 education, college experiences, church affiliation, sororities, jobs, volunteer experiences etc.
2. Often times, there are characteristics and or behaviors which we acquire from members of our family as well as those with close relationship. These traits and or behaviors, in some cases prepare us for certain positions. Talk with me about specific characteristics and or behaviors you have found useful as an African American woman middle space leader.
3. In thinking of characteristics or behaviors of your family as well as those with close relationship, is there one person who ultimately influenced your life most of all? If so, please tell me about the person and how he or she aided your passage to middle space leadership.

4. As a district middle space leader, describe experiences in the journey which you would note as unique to your gender and or ethnicity.

5. If given the opportunity to provide “words of wisdom” to other African American women regarding your passage to the district office and how to successfully navigate the journey, what would you tell her?

Challenges.

1. Being a K-12 leader has peaks and valleys, walk me through any challenges you may have experienced as you have district middle space leader?

2. Of the challenging experiences you have shared, tell me about the most awe-inspiring event which occurred as a result of your challenges.

3. District leaders are positioned to make multiple decisions throughout each day. Share with me your strategy when challenged with a critical decision.

4. Have you experienced challenges as a middle space leader that were unique to your ethnicity gender? If so, please elaborate.

5. If given the opportunity to provide “words of wisdom” to other African American woman regarding the possible challenges as a middle space leader, what would you tell her?

Location.

1. There are work experiences which directly correlate with the location and or space. Share with me memorable experiences you may have encountered specific to being a middle space leader.

2. As you settle into being located directly below the superintendent and or the superintendent’s designee; yet, above the school level administrators, there is a sense of

twixt and between. Please share with me if and or when you have experienced a tug between the superintendent and school level administrators.

3. In researching middle space leadership, I have seen multiple representations of organizational structure. Tell me about the organizational structure of your school system, please include the vertical and horizontal structure as it relates to your position.

4. Would you describe your location in the organizational structure unique due to your gender and ethnicity? Please share more about your response.

5. If given the opportunity to provide “words of wisdom” to other African American women regarding being at the district office and how to successfully navigate the space-location, what would you tell her?

Tasks.

1. The umbrella of responsibilities for veteran middle space leaders is usually quite expansive, please share with me tasks which fall under your scope of responsibility.

2. Of tasks previously described which were most significant to improving teacher effectiveness and or student achievement?

3. As a district level administrator, having a regime to complete task is extremely important. Share with me some of the processes you have established to complete assigned duties and or requirements promptly. Also, how have these processes changed throughout your tenure?

4. How would you describe the type of tasks you were assigned? For example: clerical, in-depth planning, logistical, etc. Please expound on your response.

5. Do you perceive assigned tasks to be delegated to you due to your gender and or ethnicity? Please elaborate on your response.

6. If given the opportunity to provide “words of wisdom” to other African American woman regarding task completion at the district level, what would you tell her?

Roles.

1. Title and or roles in K-12 systems across districts may vary. Share with me title changes you may have experienced during your tenure as a middle space leader. Also, please tell me your official title in the district?

2. In this role do you supervise any employees? Please list the titles of employees to whom you supervise and describe your overall experience in this role.

3. In most K-12 organizational charts, your direct supervisor for a middle space leader is typically the Superintendent. Is this the case for you? If not, please provide the title of your direct supervisor. Also, what is the gender and race of your direct supervisor?

4. Share one adjective which describes you as district middle space leader who is an African American woman. How does this adjective describe you?

5. Are there roles in which you have assumed primarily due to your gender and ethnicity? Please elaborate on your response.

6. Please offer “Words of Wisdom” to other African American woman regarding the fluidity of roles and or titles as you perceive them at the district level.

Mentoring Relationships:

1. As a middle space leader, have you been officially assigned a mentor within the district? If so, please share with me the title, gender, and ethnicity of your mentor. Also, please describe your overall experience of being a mentee.

2. Do you have an unofficial mentor within the district? If so, please share with me the title, gender, and ethnicity of your mentor. Please share with me how this unofficial mentoring relationship was formed.
3. Also, have you established a mentoring relationship with someone outside of the district? If so, please tell me how this relationship was developed as well as the gender and ethnicity of your “out of district” mentor.
4. Talk with me about official and or unofficial organizations you have joined which encourage networking and or social supports for you as a middle space leader (specifically, as an African American woman).
5. Are there parts of your role as a mentor unique due to your gender and or ethnicity? Please tell me about those components.
6. Words of wisdom” to other African American woman in district middle space leadership regarding developing, and or maintaining a mentor-mentee relationship at the district level.
7. Thank you for sharing these experiences with me. As we end this interview, is there a book, piece of literature, a podcast, TedTalk, recorded webinar or any resources you would suggest to other district middle space leaders (specifically an African American woman)?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection. The data was collected via virtual Zoom sessions. Two interview sessions were scheduled for forty-five minutes each. During the virtual interview sessions, questions were asked according to the interview protocol. Participants were encouraged to seek clarity in questions being asked as well as to expound on responses provided.

Data Analysis. The collected data was analyzed through procedures aligned to qualitative data research. Data analysis is a detailed process. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the process as “organizing the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the database, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation of them” (p.181). The researcher analyzed data as collected throughout life story interviews. The data were collected, reviewed, transcribed, organized, and interpreted. The researcher organized perceptions based on the participant’s responses. Participants were contacted to review transcriptions and to offer additional information regarding either of the themes. Moreover, participants were contacted to ensure responses were accurately represented.

Coding Process. Data collected from the recorded virtual interview sessions were reviewed, transcribed, and coded. The life story data was organized into themes based on responses. The data was also charted and organized by experiences within district middle space leadership and navigation of the experiences. Themes were ordered into perceptions according to responses aligned to the six characteristics, experiences, and navigation of the experiences. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant in the coded data set.

Credibility and Transferability

Credibility. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) defined credibility as “whether the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them. In other words, has the researcher accurately represented what the participants think, feel and do?” (p. 162). The researcher ensured perceptions of each participant were portrayed accurately by repeatedly reviewing the audio recordings. The researcher also analyzed transcribed interviews. Patterns and themes were developed into four perceptions presented in the data analysis.

Transferability. The results of this study resonated with other district middle space leaders. Each of the six themes within the interview protocol enlist “words of wisdom” for novice, veteran, and former district middle space leaders. These words of wisdom provide transferable knowledge from the study to actionable steps for the reader. Also, Black feminist thought as the supporting theory, transfers to the African American woman’s daily way of presenting herself to the world, understanding her way of interpreting the world, and validating her way of being African American and woman.

Ethical Conditions. Upon agreement to participate in the research study, each participant was provided an informational letter. The document explained the purpose of the qualitative research study from Auburn University and the Institutional Review Board of Auburn University. The researcher explained procedures which allowed each participant the opportunity to withdraw from the study without penalty. Each participant agreed to the informed consent document and engaged fully with the study.

Role of the Researcher. The experiences of African American women middle space district leaders have engaged and perplexed the researcher for quite some time. The researcher, who identifies as an African American woman and veteran district middle space, has lived experiences situated within the study. Dillard and Okpalaoka (2011) expressed, “Whether in the United States, Africa, or elsewhere in the African diaspora, women of African ascent share experiences with some form of oppression characterized and related by our class, race, or gender, by our existence as women” (p. 149). From the stance of the researcher’s identity, position, and background a unique opportunity has been presented to explore the experiences of other African American women in district middle space leadership positions. The existence of a sameness allowed the researcher to interview the study participants with a level of trust and understanding

reserved strictly for sisterhoods. The researcher incorporated reflections from experiences and ways in which she navigated the experiences as a middle space leader. Using reflexivity adds context to the researcher's position throughout the study.

Reflexivity. The art of reflecting on one's own experiences has proven to be therapeutic. The practice of releasing suppressed emotions and acknowledging uncelebrated accomplishments on this journey to and through middle space has caused pain and rest primarily in pride. Pain of not reflecting on wonderful experiences which have led to district leadership. Pride in not wanting anyone to assume, as a district leader one is self-absorbed. However, it is necessary to share the lived experiences of K-12 district middle space leadership to assist others on the journey. Dodgson (2019) explained, "In qualitative research, it is assumed that who the researcher is makes a difference in the findings of their study; objectivity is not present. In fact, it is often said 'The researcher is the research instrument' (p. 220). The researcher found the use of reflexivity helped to establish the rigor of this study because of the challenges experienced due to scripting a reflexivity narrative. Berger (2015) asserted "Reflexivity means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation" (p. 220). Furthermore, the curiosity to know more about the thoughts of the study participants from a societal perspective was paramount. It had become evident to the researcher the social constraints tied to the position of middle space leadership. Social constraints such as how the leaders interacted with others within the district as well as social pressures within the workplace noted by research participants. The balance act proved visible in the actions taken, emotions expressed, words articulated, and allegiances formed or severed in the position. These acts are aligned to the development of the

African American woman's mental capacity and ability to shift socially when necessary.

Salzman (2002, as cited in Patnaik, 2013) refers to social psychologist George Hebert Meade's reflections on reflexivity:

It is by means of reflexiveness-the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself-that the whole social process is thus brought into the experiences of the individuals involved in it; it is by such means, which enable the individual to take the attitude of the other toward himself, that the individual is consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant of that process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it. Reflexiveness, then, is the essential condition, within the social process, for the development of mind. (p. 99)

Moreover, the researcher is interested in gaining information regarding the intellect of African American women in district middle space leadership. In other words, the women who are held in high esteem in the African American community due to the path in which they have laid, have done so in professional silos; however, in a coordinated effort, African American women can improve the educational system and the community overall. Hence, the exploration of Black feminist thought has been threaded within the study. Collins (2009) stated:

The existence of Black feminist thought suggests that there is always choice and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be. Viewing the world as one in the making raises the issue of individual responsibility for bringing about changes. It also shows that while individual empowerment is key, only collective action can effectively generate the lasting institutional transformation required for social justice. (p. 309)

The researcher has maintained the belief that African American women have remained disproportionately represented in K-12 leadership positions. Through this research, collective

voices from novice, veteran, and former district middle space leaders may be heard. The researcher sought to reveal authentic truths regarding the experiences of each African American woman who chose to participate in the study.

Situatedness. The researcher has served in varying levels of K-12 administration for nearly twenty years; therefore, lived experiences as an African American woman in K-12 leadership are abundant. Moreover, the researcher has been situated in district middle space leadership for seven years. Being located directly below the superintendent and above the school level administrators, provides opportunity to witness and interact with experiences of upper- and lower-level management.

Limitations. The limitations of a study help identify any areas of potential weakness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There were two limitations of the study. The primary limitation included limited time of participants to provide in-depth responses. The second limitation included vulnerability to discuss intimate experiences when contemplating potential negative effects from district leaders regarding responses. The leaders agreed to participate voluntarily and confidentially.

Summary. Through observational data gathered from varied regional and state level conferences, the number of African American women in district leadership positions has increased. This chapter is organized to garner support primarily for those leaders. Consequently, the study is geared toward African American women as they entered and existed in middle space leadership. Utilizing the conceptual framework of middle space leadership and the theory of Black feminist thought, the voices of African American women in district middle space leadership (novice, veteran, or former) are heard.

Chapter 4a: Analysis of Experiences of District Middle Space Leaders

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences and the way in which the study participants navigate their experiences as African American women district middle space leaders in K-12 school systems. This chapter answers the research question:

Research Question 1

How do African American women experience district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems?

These experiences may transfer as a guide for African American women beginning and working in the middle space. The study also seeks to support African American woman as they exit district middle space leaders and transition to other professional opportunities. This study is aligned with the conceptual framework of Middle Space Leadership and the theory of Black feminist thought. The participants were associated with one of the following categories: novice middle space district leader (three or fewer years), veteran middle space district leader (four or more years), and former (served at minimum of five years and is no longer in the position). Teulier and Rouleau (2013) described middle managers as those who must define, negotiate, and even enact new meanings through their multiple interactions with different internal and external stakeholders (p. 312). The varied navigations of interactions depended on the structure of the school system and each participant's unique professional encounters. This chapter reveals the interrelationship between African American women and district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems of Alabama. Patricia Hill Collins (2009) articulated the importance of African American women sharing their experiences:

Black women intellectuals are 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,

should we choose to embrace it. It is more likely for Black women, as members of an oppressed group, to have critical insights into the condition of our oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures. (p. 39)

The ways in which K-12 leadership in middle space leaders successfully navigate the numerous responsibilities affiliated with the position is noteworthy; furthermore, to experience the space as an African American woman who is a novice, veteran, or former middle space leader is even more telling. The intersection of these identities is paramount to understanding the ways in which African American women experience daily life in middle spaces. Kimberle' Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to describe the multiple oppressions experienced by Black women. Crenshaw argued:

Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination-the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women-not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (p. 149)

Whereas Crenshaw's study magnifies general intersections faced by Black women, this study explores how Crenshaw's observations apply to educational leadership. The oppressions range from blatant, visible disrespect for African American women as leaders to microaggressions of exclusion. There again, the African American woman is left to identify herself as a leader within the district and call into question the omission. Intersectional scholars

Dill, et al. (2007) noted, “To a large extent, intersectional work is about identity” (p. 630). The full identity of African American women has proven to be complex. The complexity is centered in the notion of equality. The accomplished African American woman K-12 district middle space leader yearns to be identified as just that—a leader one who has toiled and brought effective change to the district while being discriminated against due to gender and or race. In an effort to exist in the organization, discrimination is relegated to another piece of the puzzle when African American and woman in the workplace. Stewart and McDermott (2004) asserted, “African American women may employ different cognitive coping mechanisms than European American women when dealing with experiences of discrimination, adding another layer of complexity to the causes, perceptions, and effects of discrimination” (p. 532).

The narratives of this study provided rich descriptions regarding unique experiences of district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems. Additionally, the narratives of the middle space leadership experience gave an insight to the walk of those experiences as African American women. Collins (1989) purported, “Living life as Black women requires wisdom, since knowledge about the dynamic of race, gender, and class subordination has been essential to Black women’s survival” (p. 758). The research questions guiding this study were: What are the experiences of African American women as district middle space leaders in K-12 school systems? How do African American women navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems? The participants’ experiences which spoke most saliently to the research questions formed four perceptions:

1. Intersection-Being African American and Woman
2. Visible Voicelessness
3. Messenger in the Middle
4. Onliness and Loneliness of Solo Work

Analysis of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) Conceptual Framework of Middle Space Leadership: (Passages, Location, Challenges, Tasks, Roles and Mentoring Relationships) and Black feminist thought literature provided opportunity for an in-depth study of middle space leadership characteristics as experienced by African American women in K-12 district school systems.

To capture the experiences of the participants in the most authentic form, qualitative research was utilized. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), “qualitative research includes detailed descriptions of the study and clearly expresses the participants’ voices” (p. 56). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research allows participants to tell their stories. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) also noted, “qualitative research seeks to establish credibility and dependability and is concerned with the issue of transferability; that is, how and in what ways the findings of a particular study might apply or be useful in other similar contexts” (p. 56). Coupled with qualitative research, Black feminist thought was chosen to exemplify the experience of African American women as middle space leaders. Evans-Winters (2019) stated:

In qualitative research textbooks, in particular when looking at how research is applicable to current social, health, and economic challenges like food insecurity, state sanctioned violence, school inequality, obesity and cancer, childhood trauma, homophobia, etc.

Black women’s worldview is shaped by our everyday joys and struggle as well as our quests to solve our own community’s problems and pushback against societal barriers. (p. 15)

Because of the use of qualitative research undergirded by the Black feminist thought theme, the power of self-definition gave way to the participants’ perceptions as African American women district middle space leaders in K-12 school systems. As a measure of

authenticity and vulnerability, the researcher's autoethnographic stories are intermingled with interview data.

The power of self-definition, a core theme of Black feminist thought, noted by famed, Black feminist thought author, Patricia Hill Collins, permeated the study. Collins (2009) argued:

By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects. (pp. 125-126)

The power of self-definition in terms of district middle space leadership can be one of power and paralysis for African American women. In terms of providing leadership to all assigned areas, power is the dynamic in play. In terms of articulating deficits within the district, paralysis of voice enters the space. Being able to harness her power as a district leader and not surrendering to negative mental chatter is the power of self-definition.

Perception 1: Intersection—Being African American and Woman

An overlapping method of navigating district middle space positions is understanding and owning the politics of being African American and woman. Crenshaw (1991) stated, "Black women are commonly marginalized by a politics of race alone or gender alone, and that a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both" (p. 1283). The meaning behind this perception is to understand, as an African American

woman, you must be prepared to be challenged regarding your decisions, questioned in your rationales, and demanded to furnish proof of your knowledge. Just as the intersections experienced by African American foremothers, the district middle space leaders of this study faced defining moments of intersectionality. Sojourner Truth declared:

Well, children where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's this here talking about? That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man-when I could get it-and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Loewenberg & Bogin, 1976, p. 235)

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle' Crenshaw. Crenshaw, a legal scholar determined to articulate the defining discrimination regarding hiring practices of black women declared the intersectionality of race and gender were at the forefront of the legal issue. Crenshaw (1990) noted, "Intersectionality supports the analysis of "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's...experiences" (p. 1244). The experiences of African American women in K-12 district middle space leadership are

reflective of gender and race as the core of their professional journeys. Collins and Bilge (2020) argue, “Intersectionality refers to the way in which people, either as individuals or as part of groups, produce, draw upon, or apply intersectional frameworks in their daily lives” (p.38).

In 1851, Sojourner Truth so eloquently described all that she had endured, yet she is not seen as a woman on equal footing as her white, female counterpart. This study’s participants and researcher echo her voice one hundred seventy years later. Three of the four participants hold a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. The fourth participant has an Educational Specialist degree. All of the participants have been classroom teachers, worked in administrative roles at the school and district level, yet the cry “Ain’t I woman?” can still be heard. The phrasing has slightly shifted given the time. *Ain’t I proven* based on my higher educational attainment? *Ain’t I proven* based on the excellence in my work and what I have produced for the district? *Ain’t I proven* by my matriculation through the ranks? The participants would say, “No, there is still evidence required, because I am African American and Woman.”

The study is sequenced to understand the overall experiences of middle space leadership as African American women. The novice middle space leader, Elise, with a mere two years in the position, gave voice to beginning her career as middle space leader and the perseverance required to continue excelling in the position. The most senior of the veteran middle space leaders, Aubrey, with over twenty years as an educator and with more than five of those years in middle space rendered a myriad of views as a woman, as an African American, and as a leader. Mya, the most experienced, veteran middle space leader with well over ten years in the space, rendered insightful accounts of navigating the space in relation to the organizational structure of the district. As a measure of wisdom and experience, former middle space leader, McKenzie, delivered vivid accounts of her experience as a veteran middle space leader. All the leaders

articulated in one way or another the knowing of being African American and woman in middle space leadership in Alabama K-12 school systems as a unique experience filled with rewards, regrets, and countless opportunities for resilience.

Elise

Elise presents as a mother, daughter, sister, and educator from the heart. She always knew she would teach due to inspirations from an elementary school teacher (Mrs. Brown). As a novice district middle space leader, Elise brings eleven years of secondary teaching to the space of K-12 district leadership. On her journey to middle space leadership, she was promoted to business department chair, career technical department chair, and assistant career tech director. She experienced being an assistant principal at the high school and elementary levels prior to landing at the district office. She is the first to hold the position of director of teaching and learning in her district. Elise equates many experiences as a district middle space leader as those unique to being African American and woman:

An African American woman in a leadership position is sometimes watched more carefully and may be held to a different standard. And so I'm always mindful of my approach and my tone with people that I might be conversing with just to make sure that I'm always professional, always hearing and understanding. Not that I wouldn't be that way anyway, but I just don't want anyone to say, "Oh, the old cliché of an angry black woman or something like that." So, I'm always mindful of that. (Elise, p. 4)

Much to Elise's point, the negative stereotypes aimed to demean the African American woman operate as a constant reminder of watchful eyes. The images have sought to control the narrative of an angry, out of control, unyielding woman who lacks the discipline to lead. The

researcher's view holds in parallel to Elise's point. The ongoing battle in the mind and actions of African American leaders resides in the space to prove them wrong, stay calm, and remain professional. In addition to the aforementioned battles in the mind, the mind combat of merely being in the position is oftentimes a hard-fought battle for African American women. The observation of this uniqueness is noted by Elise as well in a matter of appreciation for her plight to date as a novice middle space leader. Elise asserts that "Leadership is considered or viewed as a male-dominant profession, especially when you get into superintendents and assistant superintendent it is white male. And, so, I think being in this position as a black female is unique in itself" (Elise, p. 5).

Collins (2009) stated, "Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. Negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression" (p. 7). As she elaborated on the notion of stereotypes, Elise insisted:

I think people might sometimes question your ability to think, or people may say that you are in a position because you fit the requirement of being an African-American woman because sometimes you're led to believe that they have to meet some type of status quo. (Elise, p. 8)

From the researcher's purview, if ever there was a view on being an African American and women, Elise's account pronounced my varied experiences as a veteran middle space leader who is African American. I happen to sympathize with her regarding this notion and applaud her level of maturity to persevere. To corroborate the point, Judy Alston's chapter 5 *Black Females*

Making It to the Superintendency, a contribution in *Sacred Dreams, Women and the Superintendency* contends, “Despite the barriers of race and gender, hard work and endurance have always been the foundation upon which black women have made great strides (p. 79).

These strides have persisted in the wake of continued roadblocks for African American women. Such employment interferences present as the good ole’ boy network as well as the common thought that men are born leaders. It is the summation of the researcher that, oftentimes, the goal is not to keep African American women out of leadership spaces, it is an attempt to extend favor to those who are in common circles and share common pedigree. Imploring this sentiment, Elise claims:

In general, leadership is considered or viewed as a male-dominant profession, especially when you get into superintendencies and assistant, it is often a white male. And, so, I think being in this position as a black female is unique in itself.

(Elise, p. 5)

Mya

The confident and inspirational Mya is a veteran district middle space leader. Mya is a wife and mother who enjoys sharing her love for animals and science with her son. She attributes her overall success as an educator to her military father and a passion for forensics and robotics. Mya admits she never wanted to be a principal or assistant principal but wanted to be behind the scenes developing curriculum or working with at-risk children. She capitalized on a biology degree by teaching for five years while obtaining an alternative master’s degree and a master’s degree in instructional leadership. Now with more than ten years as a district leader and a district K-5 curriculum and instruction education specialist, Mya is more committed than ever to connect science and curriculum behind the scenes of K-12 public education:

You get more respect when you're knowledgeable. So, when you are knowledgeable, and you have the capacity and they see that you're knowledgeable and sometimes you have to impress upon them to work with them on teams and show that you are knowledgeable. You really have to prove to them that you are knowledgeable and you have the capacity and that you are a professional. (Mya, p. 13)

While it is an admirable trait to be extremely knowledgeable in any profession, the amount of pressure felt by African American women to prove worthy to the system can be crippling. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) emphasized:

What the research tells us is that if you are a Black woman working in settings with few Black or few women, you take on an additional risk. It's likely that you'll feel unduly pressured to perform and prove yourself, and that your emotional and physical well-being may be compromised as a result. (p. 156)

Middle space leadership in K-12 school systems requires a constant attainment of knowledge, the skillset to convey that knowledge, and often to model instructional strategies. This can be challenging for any middle space leader; however, it can be extremely burdensome when progress is being halted due to factors out of anyone's control such as gender and race.

Mya crystalizes the notion of being African American and woman when explaining attempts to observe curriculum and assist principals:

Now I will say from being an African American female, my Caucasian principals, they have reservations and their reservations come from mostly my magnet school principals. They are accustomed to doing things a certain way. They don't want to do anything as it relates to RTI interventions for students. They have a certain

rhyme or reason as to how they want to run their school, and being a black female, they definitely have given me some pushback. I think the pushback is because I am a black female. (Mya, p.12)

The RtI (Response to Intervention) services Mya references are services afforded to students who may need additional supports. These supports include but not limited to the following: explicit small group instruction, explicit one on one instruction, hands-on manipulatives, seating closer to the instructor for less distraction, and or the use of audio materials to read aloud text. The process to initiate RtI services includes administration of baseline screeners and gathering all applicable data associated with the student (attendance, discipline, and medical). The teacher then meets with the RtI team to analyze these data and discuss strategies. Lastly, teachers attempt to implement the strategies provided by the RtI team while monitoring the progress of the student. Typically, the teacher will meet with the RtI team each quarter to discuss progress and or next steps. The suggestions provided by the RtI team are often minimal; however, the time to render the services, while completing an already exhaustive workload, can make even minimal tasks require maximal attention for most teachers.

Aubrey

A veteran district middle space leader, Aubrey has been in K-12 public education for twenty-two years. Of those, the past five years have been spent as special education testing coordinator and curriculum coordinator. She has served in the roles of classroom special education teacher at the secondary level, counselor, and assistant principal. As a high school student, Aubrey knew she would be an assistant principal. That was her ultimate goal. She strategized the quickest route to the assistant principalship which led to obtaining a master's

degree in counseling and then completing administrative certification. With five years under her belt, she became an assistant principal. Utilizing skills gained from working in her father's independent business, she was equipped to interact with different people and facilitate difficult conversations with teachers, parents, and students as needed. After reaching the eleventh year of being a building level administrator, she questioned, "What now?" Ultimately, she decided to seek opportunities at the district level. Aubrey credits being a district middle space leader as a natural progression from classroom teacher to assistant principal to counseling to the district. She reflects on having the goal as assistant principal as the ceiling she sought for herself, but by seeing more and doing more, she dreamed more. Aubrey's experience reveals a common theme for African American women, remaining stagnant or stuck in positions they have outgrown:

I think that the obstacle that African American women face is moving from wherever somebody has tapped you to be placed or hired you to be in that position and in some aspects, there is a feeling of being stuck. Show your capability of being able to do other things besides what it is that you've been hired to do and sometimes that may mean moving to a different location. I think that a person has to prove themselves to be overly capable of taking on a different challenge. (Aubrey, p. 4)

In one sense, Aubrey holds to the thought that advancement is granted based on individual work, merit, and scholarship and not so much as the individual being shackled to a position. On the other hand, she acknowledges systems in place where the progression of one person is predicated on someone of a similar background, ethnicity, or gender vacating the position. I am of two minds. I agree with Aubrey's stance on being stuck in certain leadership roles, but I cannot agree that simply proving yourself as overly capable is a directive to be honored in the syntax of

the African American woman. To put it succinctly, Collins (2009) stated that Black women, as a group in the United States, “live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female” (pg. 27). As it has been documented in the participants’ statements and is the experience of the researcher, in most cases, it matters not the level of proof when sexism and racism enter the room. This treatment causes a lack of support for the African American woman as she attempts to transition to district middle space leadership. Another practice of being stuck or typecast comes to the forefront when systems look to replace one minority with another minority without giving proper consideration for the best person for the position. It calls into question the African American woman being hired on merit or a management must have. Aubrey speaks to such occurrences in her experience as a veteran middle space leader:

A black female has always been in the role that I am currently serving. So, kind of going back to what I said earlier as to being able to move or being seen in a different role, then, I replace a black female, then black female replaced a black female, so I don’t know that there is anything unique about me in this position, my race or my sex other than I felt like the chances of me getting the position were higher because I look like the previous person who was in the position.

(Aubrey, p.10)

McKenzie

As a child of the segregated south, McKenzie’s contribution to this research is steeped in words of wisdom for African American women as they journey through K-12 education in Alabama. As a former veteran district middle space leader, McKenzie chose education as a path to strengthen literacy in the elementary schools of her small southeastern city in Alabama. McKenzie readily admits, “education is not my first career choice.” She wanted to be a lawyer

and attend college out of state; however, her parents could not afford this plan. She attended college in Alabama and earned a degree in psychology and a minor in personnel management. It was a chance encounter with her co-worker's fourth or fifth grade child who could not read which changed the course of her professional career. McKenzie decided to obtain a degree in elementary education. After thirteen years of being a successful teacher, she found herself declaring, "I can do more than teach." McKenzie opted for a Ph.D. in Human Resources and was hired in the newly created position of Human Resources Director for the district. McKenzie acknowledges the support of her husband and children who understood the family's commitment to her beginning and completing a Ph.D. while taking on a new role at the district office. McKenzie also attributes her success to her grandmother who always assured her she could be anything she wanted to be if she worked hard and did well:

As an African American female, everything that I ever did and still do I feel that I'm going to go over and beyond to do it. Because everyone's waiting for you to have that stumble and that fall. I think that as an African American female, we have to go over and beyond to always be able to confidently do our job professionally and with great knowledge and professionalism. (McKenzie, p.10)

McKenzie's tactics to go over and beyond are explained as "shifting" by researchers, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003). The authors claim, "Black women in our country have had to perfect what we call 'shifting' a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society" (p. 6). As an example, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) explained, "Shifting is often internal, invisible. It's the chipping away at her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness-often a consequence of living amidst racial and gender bias" (p. 7). The African American woman leader has lived in a space of constant thoughts about what others

are thinking of her skills rather than who she has presented herself to be. These have placed a veil over who the African American woman is in her skin and based on her merit. In her skin, she is alive, joyful, humorous, caring, spiritual, and a sister. Based on her merit or worth in the African American community, she is a leader, a role model, a mentor, an elder, and a friend. These supreme characteristics tend to be absorbed to blend and or assimilate within the culture of the majority. The shift happens while attempting to merge as needed to garner support from the superintendent as well as other school level administrators. Such is the case as explained by a former middle space leader, “I experienced a lot of roadblocks and barriers because of ethnicity and because of gender and getting buy-in on whatever program or change that needed to occur” (McKenzie, p. 7).

To circumvent such barriers, African American women have learned to take in account their full way of being to successfully navigate district middle space leadership. As a matter of emphasis, Dillard and Okpaloka (2011) argued, “Black women work and live within a context of struggle against systems of oppression and exploration, both large and small” (p. 156).

Researcher’s Autoethnographic Account. I am fortunate to have served as a public K-12 educator for twenty-seven years. Within the span of my career, I have been an elementary classroom teacher, middle school assistant principal, middle school principal, elementary school assistant principal and district level curriculum and instruction leader. Similar to Elise, I always knew I would be a teacher. After five years of teaching and tackling grade level responsibilities, utilizing my skillset to strengthen the school became my goal. Although I excelled in the leadership coursework, I was ill-prepared for the politics of school level and district level leadership. Moreover, I was not prepared for my gender and race to be prominent in my leadership journey. From my scope, there is a certain heaviness to being an African American

and woman as a district middle space leader in a K-12 school system. I, too, hold the stance of needing to prove to myself and others that I belong. I find myself revisiting the thought, I have earned my position due to my contributions to the district. In turn, I find it necessary to attest to aforementioned women (teachers, staff members, and the lone African American woman building administrator) earning the positions which they hold. When hiring the African American and woman principal, the heaviness I experienced was an unbearable weight. Though she proved to be a successful assistant principal, her ability regarding “being a leader” was called into question. I was baffled by this assertion because she had served in the capacity of assistant principal at the school in need of a principal. Accolades about her level of fit for the position of assistant principal were ongoing; however, the rally cry, “we need a leader,” was reverberated. The constant question in my mind was, “If she has been a leader for years, why is she not a leader now?” My recent coursework regarding mental models in leadership was put into practice. The term mental model (the picture formed when a word or phrase is articulated) could be used to analyze this situation. From what I could surmise, in the minds of those requesting a “leader,” their mental models of a leader had been shaped by the leaders in their circles of influence. The circles being husbands, police chiefs, bank presidents, fire chiefs, pastors, and superintendents...all men and all White. These White men were leaders. This assertion on my behalf is not to portray the educators as racists or anti-female leaders. It is merely to understand the context of leadership based on their responses and requests. Olson (2019) noted, “Leaders that best fit the ideal-worker norm- white, male, married, and hetero-sexual-are perceived as more attractive” (p. 25).

There I sat bewildered, a district middle space leader, and an African American woman. I was experiencing the urge to remain professional (not behave as the angry black woman as

expressed by Elise). I brought to the table the potential African American woman's vitae ("operate with knowledge as suggested" by Mya). I spent hours attempting to understand why those who opposed her being hired could only see her as an assistant principal and not in the principalship (begging the question that I now know Aubrey was asking...should you remain in a position others have deemed best for you? Should you remain stuck?) Then most of all, to McKenzie's point, going above and beyond as a teacher, and assistant principal. I knew she had always gone above and beyond. That experience called to question my being as an African American woman district middle space leader, like none other.

Perception 2: Visible Voicelessness

What does it look like for Black women to move freely through space when we are always confronting the precariousness of life at the intersections of race and gender, of class and mental health, of love and dreams?

(Cooper, 2018, p.109)

The visual for many African American women when moving freely is one of a person who quietly exudes power and class. It is a look of loud accomplishments and soft uncertainty. The look evolves over time from whimsical missteps to stomps of wisdom and caution as she enters the seasoned, veteran years of life. The intersections of race and gender, of class and mental health, and of love and dreams questioned by Dr. Brittany Cooper are the intersections of scrutiny which remain visible in the lives of African American women; however, rarely voiced effectively.

Although leadership roles have increased for women, the issue of silence has persisted. Treasure et al. (2013) noted "it's important for women to speak up when they identify policies or workplace practices that exclude women or cause them to be overlooked" (p. 56). Middle space

leaders who have navigated structures and found avenues to voice concerns gain respect within the organization. This navigation typically comes at a cost while being heard and seen within the district. Brunner (1999) discusses such a voice regarding women at highest office in K-12 school systems, superintendent. She argued, “Often we have begun with a vague curiosity and found ourselves in the middle of a deep outrage that lives in the gut of women who have overtly faced and acknowledged gender and racial bias” (p. 7).

A tactic commonly used is silencing the leader in meetings by not acknowledging a statement or suggestion made by the African American, woman leader. In other cases, subtle micro aggressions such as omitting the African American woman from an invitation of leaders to discuss upcoming plans in the districts. There again, the African American woman is left to identify herself as a leader within the district and call into question the omission.

Elise

As a novice middle space leader Elise notes it is not necessarily easy to find your voice and talk with the powers to be regarding opportunities for advancement and compensation aligned to those advancements:

Have the voice to express your concerns about titles. Because if you’re doing the work, I feel the title should go along according to the work that’s being done. And it’s a lot easier said than done because I haven’t found that voice yet to express. Finding your voice to have those crucial conversations about roles and responsibilities, and the titles and the pay that goes along with it. (Elise, p. 7)

The researcher’s experience is parallel to Elise’s. African American women now are afforded more opportunities to be district middle space leaders. There are more opportunities to be employed and viewed in positions in the district office; however, there is a measure of

voicelessness associated with the space. She is there at the leadership meeting, at the board meeting, and in the schools; however, on matters of grave importance for her advancement, voicelessness ensues. Speaking now regarding titles and compensation will benefit African American women for generations to come.

The balance of being visible in the district and voicing concerns in the district is not a matter to take lightly. As a veteran middle space leader, I observe the absence of women, especially women of color working in positions of prominence at the district level; therefore, the uniqueness of your advancement and the overarching power of White male dominance in K-12 school systems in Alabama is a heavy consideration. I weigh the volume of my voice against the visibility of my actions. The volume of my voice is low but constant, similar to an idling car, raring to go, yet standing still. This low rumble of my voice is weighed against the high visibility of the position. The position often requires public dissemination of information. For instance, the district's annual institute day is one of high visibility. This day is reserved for formal introductions, presentations to gain information, and fellowship for all faculty and staff members in the district. Other high visibility moments occur during monthly board of education meetings. Throughout the year, the position of district middle space leader requires me to formally share information with the public. During these high visibility times, I feel like a respected, well-thought-of leader. In some cases, when decisions are made within the district, however, I am left out of the conversation, and I feel the low rumble. I feel like the idling car. I feel that I am seen but not heard. I am visible yet voiceless.

Some might object to my stance on visible voicelessness due to the noticeable advancements of African American women in district middle space leadership positions. I must concede because the African American woman is positioned at the district office that visibility

does give way to voice; however, I maintain that it is a space of “be seen and heard sparingly.”

Bonner (1987, as cited in Collins, 2009) alluded to the same thought:

So -being a woman- you can wait. You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sudden-and weighted as if our feet were cast in the iron of your soul. No wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty. But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha-who brown like I am-sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing....Motionless on the outside. But inside? (p.108)

Mya

Mya who is a veteran middle space leader experienced growing up with her military father and understanding ways in which one operates in a system. She brings to the space her father’s advice regarding the necessity of listening and speaking at the correct times. She uses this advice to navigate the experience of being seen at the district office yet being heard when required:

You want to know what your mission is, what your vision is, and also be able to listen when it’s time to listen, speak when it's time to speak, and voice your opinion when it is time. And sometimes, it is not time. (Mya, p.18)

Juxtaposed to Mya’s experience of speaking only when it is time to speak, too often African American women experience such vulnerability when attempting to speak that they remain voiceless for fear of facing opposition, judgment, or being dismissed altogether. Evans-Winters (2019) asserted, “Most of us simply maintain and try to survive, sort of speak, until we are encouraged, introduced to and learn to continually and purposefully engage in acts of resistance” (p.70).

Aubrey

Aubrey is attuned to the dynamics of influence and being seen as the leader; however, the power struggle to make your voice heard as a leader is often in contradiction to your visibility: You have influence, maybe, depending on the area; however, people are looking to you because you are a supervisor or coordinator, they're looking to you for those certain answers and sometimes you may not have the answers to their questions simply because you are waiting on someone else or something else to help you make the decision. That's a challenge to the person who is seen as the direct contact but yet you don't have real decision-making power. (Aubrey, p. 5)

In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) includes an excerpt from Patricia Williams' essay "On Being the Objective of Property" (in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*). As I interpret the excerpt, it points to the essence of being without voice, without power, and without influence:

There are moments in my life when I feel as though a part of me is missing. There are days when I feel so invisible that I can't remember what day of the week it is, when I feel so manipulated that I can't remember my own name, when I feel so lost and angry that I can't speak a civil word to the people who love me best.

These are the times when I catch sight of my reflection in store windows and I am surprised to see a whole person looking back...I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself, draw an internal pattern that is smooth and whole.

(p.74)

In concert with gathering these pieces of ourselves for visibility, we also know we must enlist support from other stakeholders in the district. In doing so, the opportunity be seen and

have your voice indeed heard is multiplied. African American women must be creative in having their voices heard. Also, they must be novel in gaining support for ideas that may be controversial, progressive, or simply innovative ways to address problems in the district. Aubrey notes an account where she has executed this strategy:

I've used the building level administrators to help votes, I've used their voice as vote so that it's not just me being the bad girl or hey, this is a problem or so that you recognize it from different levels, as well. (Aubrey, p. 10)

McKenzie

McKenzie, the former middle space leader, brings to the study the historical perspective of desegregation. She has the early experience of being at the district office as a person of color and honoring the system of silence, yet her sentiment regarding visibility and voicelessness is one of contradiction to the other participants. McKenzie asserts:

You can be at the district office and never have a seat at the table. As an African-American woman, as an African American female, you have got to have a seat at the table. And if you are the only one that can be responsible and accountable for getting that seat and maintaining that seat at the table because your voice still has to be heard. (McKenzie, p. 16)

While McKenzie maintains the need to be seen and heard as an African American woman in middle space leadership, the challenge to do so and the reasoning for the challenge is not ignored. She articulates such a point:

There are going to be challenges, never forget who you are, never forget how you go to where you are and always remember that you're the voice for so many

people whose voices cannot be heard. Don't ever lose your voice or give it up for someone else. (McKenzie, p. 11)

To be visible as a leader and to give voice in matters of importance is often not the intended goal of positioning an African American woman at the district office; however, in resounding fashion and in whispers made by the clacking of keystrokes, African American women learn how to avert the intended goal of silence to a resounding yell for improvements across the district with others being none the wiser. This is a strategy used during the early 1900s by the Jeanes Supervisors. The African American women who were hired to fulfill the mission of the Anna T. Jeanes Foundation, also known as the Negro Rural School Fund, or Jeanes Fund. Krause (2003) noted:

The fund was to be used solely toward the maintenance and assistance of rural, community and country schools for Southern Negroes and not for the use or benefit of large institutions, but for the purpose of rudimentary education as hereinbefore referred to and to promote peace in the land and good will among men. (p. 192)

As a method to navigate the space yet move the needle on issues which mattered the most, the Jeanes knew how to use voicelessness to their advantage. An excerpt from Krause's 2003 article, Adam Fairclough (in "Teaching Equality, Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow") observes that Jeanes teachers quietly camouflaged their leadership before white superintendents and school boards yet manipulated them to gain resources for their schools. "Those black Jean supervisors," Saunders recalled, "were... 'human engineers' -they were that plus" (p. 201). Today, African American women district middle space leaders operate much like the Jean supervisors of the 1900s. The leaders quietly utilize their positions to support school level administrators in many cases and to advocate for initiatives driven by the superintendent. They understand how to

engineer policies and procedures for the betterment of the district without an audible proclamation.

Researcher's Autoethnographic Account. In thinking of the accounts rendered by the participants, I began to think of instances where I have felt present in the space, but my voice was muted. The most recent occurred during a webinar at the central office. I invited a minority female administrator to view a webinar regarding Response to Instruction. About fifteen minutes into the webinar, I heard the sound of a drill. I went into the break room and mouthed, "I'm on a webinar." From what I could quickly glean from the situation, the installation of a paper towel dispenser was the task at hand. The drilling stopped and I went back into the conference room. Just about the time I returned to my seat, to my amazement and disappointment, the sound of drilling was blaring from the break room yet again. I looked at the administrator and she looked at me. I was humiliated. Here I sit, second in command of the district, and I am silenced. The drilling was particularly humiliating for two reasons: it was being done by the superintendent and the school level administrator was witnessing it. Moreover, this school level administrator was one whom I have informally mentored as a woman in K-12 administration and more pointedly as an African American woman in administration. I was wondering, "If he were in this room on a webinar and I did such a thing, what would be his reaction?" In my heart of "yield to the greater assumption," I told myself, "He started the drilling process and honestly did not know I was in the conference room." As I snapped back to reality, however, I surmised he continued because he did not value the work that was being done. It is too difficult for me to think that he did not value the administrator or me. As I pondered the incident, I wondered if he would chalk it up to "just joking" or "not that big of a deal." I contemplated voicing my thoughts and explaining my perception of the incident, but that vulnerability of knowing that I could simply be dismissed

crept in and so I remain visible as the second in command and still voiceless because it is too difficult to articulate my feelings.

To frame this act of silencing, I turned to Robin M. Boylorn's text, *Sweetwater, Black Women and Narratives of Resilience*. The text has a segment titled, Muted Group Theory. Boylorn (2013) asserted Muted Group Theory attempts to represent nondominant or marginalized groups whose voices and experiences are often overlooked or silenced (p.7).

Karamarae (2005, as cited in Boylorn, 2013) summarizes Muted Group Theory:

Muted group theory suggests that people attached or assigned to subordinate groups may have a lot to say, but they tend to have relatively little power to say it... Their speech is disrespected by those in the dominant positions; their knowledge is not considered sufficient for public decision-making or policy making process of that culture; their experiences are interpreted for them by others; and they are encouraged to see themselves as represented in the dominant discourse. (p. 55)

The theory assists in bringing context to the act of silencing as experienced by the researcher; however, in the case of the participants, they are in the dominant positions. These positions give the illusion of being heard; it is painstakingly clear to the African American women in this study and the researcher that the position does not guarantee a voice.

Perception 3: Messenger in the Middle

The role of a K-12 middle space leader requires intentional focus to the location within the organization. Leaders who have worked between upper level and lower-level structures in K-12 public schools have explained the role as somewhat of a balancing act. Turner (2002) noted that women of color in academia mirror experiences of African American women district middle

space leaders. Turner stated, “Although faculty women of color have obtained academic positions, even when tenured they often confront situations that limit their authority and, as they address these situations, drain their energy” (p. 75). Similarly, participants of this study make the claim of being situated at the district; however, their authority is undermined.

Elise

Elise gives an account of how the position of district middle management ultimately feels. She also alludes to her level of authority as a district middle space leader. In her experience, the building level administrators are experiencing much of what Elise experiences on a daily basis as a district middle space leader; however, she is not at liberty to share this challenge with them. They do not understand that the questions they have and the frustrations they experience are the same as her own:

I feel stuck in the middle, I'll say stuck in the middle between superintendent needs, wants, and building level administration needs, wants, and sometimes building level administrators just don't understand. And so having to be the voice of reason for the building level administrators and helping them understand where the superintendent is coming from. And then just sometimes just having to remind them at the end of the day, he's the superintendent. He makes the final call, and we may not agree with everything, but we report to him, or we report to her. And so whatever the vision is, we just need to make sure that we're carrying that vision out. (Elise, p. 9)

As evidenced by the position, Elise must acknowledge the inquiries of building level administrators as well as assist the superintendent in decision making (however the opportunity may present itself). As a district middle space leader, she is there to offer support to both entities

and to keep the lines of communication flowing, especially in her moments of feeling stuck. Salih and Doll (2013) argued the point that, “Due to their structural positions, middle managers play a key role in managing resources, providing information to decision makers, giving emotional support to their subordinates, and communicating the strategic intent of senior management throughout the organization (p. 37).

Mya

In the space of twixt and between, district middle space leadership can be one of ambiguity. Ambiguity appears in the sense of finding balance between ultimate loyalty to the superintendent and support for the building level administrators. The district middle space leader is left hanging in the space of who to attend to in the moment. There are times when information is treated only as a “need to know” basis per the superintendent; however, there are instances when the building level administrator would benefit from insight to decisions being made. Mya seeks to find a balance between the two:

I consider myself a voice in between, because I do have meetings with the superintendent. So I would say that when we are called into meetings with the superintendent to make decisions, whether it’s fiscal decisions, decisions on summer school or anything that’s pertinent going on in the district, I always speak with the principals to see and the reason why I do that is because they are the ones that have to implement whatever decisions we make at the table, they have to implement it. (Mya, p. 15)

Mya has to be strategic in the way building level administrators are brought into the conversation. The approach must embolden both sides of the equation. She recalls instances where her efforts afforded the building level administrators inclusion in the overall

organizational structure. Efforts must also be aligned to the vision and mission of the district for superintendent approval. In doing so, the building level administrators and superintendent are positively affected by Mya's actions to clearly communicate the aspirations of both sides. Mya declares, "I still have to play the mediator because I can't give out too much information. And, still, I have to be an advocate for those-middle school principals" (Mya, p. 15). This is noted by Balogun and Johnson (2005) as they argue "middle-level managers mediate the impact of top-down strategy through their sense making" (p. 24).

Aubrey

Aubrey shares the same position as Elise. She discusses the experience of being in between the school level and the building level with certain pieces of information she may or may not be at liberty to share regarding the superintendent's decisions:

Sometimes it is hard to be in-between. I like to be as direct, honest with people as possible and so, sometimes you can't, you don't have an answer, you can't give an answer, and I certainly don't ever want to make an answer up just to give an answer and so that's probably is the biggest challenge, not having the authority to make a decision and somebody is looking at you and you don't want to, you want to protect whatever, you want to make sure you're loyal and that is not seen as any type of disrespect by answering or not answering. (Aubrey, p. 5)

Aubrey's assertion regarding loyalty further complicates the issue of being between the building level and the superintendent. Accurate information must be disseminated to the superintendent as well as to the building level administrators. To this point, Burch and Danley (1980) define one of the roles of a supervisor is to provide formal communications. The authors outlined this role as "Providing official and policy information to individuals and groups, officially representing the

views of the system, and ensuring proper information flow” (p. 30). Aubrey attempts to adhere to these requirements while balancing need-to-know information for the building level administrators and must-know information for the superintendent.

McKenzie

McKenzie references being supported by the superintendent and assuming the same support will be bestowed upon her by the building level administrators. Just as Mya described being the voice in between, McKenzie is seeking support between the two entities:

Trying to do what your superintendent wants and then these people, the principals don't want it so it's like a “tug of war” kind of thing. You make the assumption that they supported you because you don't have a choice. You are the messenger and you're going to get it done and you are the one that's going to make it happen. (McKenzie, p. 14)

In reflection on the accounts of both Mya and McKenzie, appropriate communication from the middle space leader is expected from both the building level administrators as well as the superintendent. While I agree there is an anticipated level of communication for middle space leaders, I contend that to accomplish open dialogue, it must be clearly articulated by the superintendent. By not reassuring the middle space leader, miscommunication infiltrates the organization. Failing to communicate the organization's strategic direction to all employees is likely to lead to misinterpretation of strategic intents which might cause execution failure (Cocks, 2010).

Researcher's Autoethnographic Account. Operating as a district middle space leader of an organization is exhilarating yet exhausting work. It is exhilarating because of the position. I am primed to be at the forefront of school level and district level implementations. When

opportunities present themselves, my skillset is utilized for scheduling logistics, curricular options, professional learning, curriculum selection, and so on. During those times of involvement, I feel alive. I have a good pulse on what the schools need and how I may be able to support those needs from the district office. The work is exhausting when I'm left to figure out what is going on at the school level and, in some cases, the district office. When I am omitted (knowingly or unknowingly) from planning and or conversations, I feel disconnected from the work. I have questioned this feeling of being disconnected and have come to the conclusion that I work to be of service to the district. I work to deliver my best self to the administrators, the teachers, and the students. Maxwell (2007) explained, "Leaders who want to succeed maximize every asset and resource they have for the benefit of their organization" (p. 94).

Perception 4: Onliness and Loneliness of Solo Work

Alice Walker(1983) attributes onliness to seeing people who have not been noticed.

Walker expresses how her positioning as an outcast impacted her thinking:

I believe, though, that it was from this period—from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast—that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. (p. 244)

Elise

Being there is a tough job, especially when you're having to balance so many things. I don't have the help that other districts that are possibly larger would have like the extra coaches and coordinators and things of that nature. And, so, a lot of the work that has to be done, I have to do. (Elise, p. 10)

The feeling of onliness permeates the space for me as the researcher. As noted by Elise, the responsibility or burden to place on oneself to do the work of so many people. Very much like

Elise and working in a smaller district lends itself to the feeling of onliness because there literally is not a team of people to apply the practice of distributive leadership. As a district middle space leader, therefore, one must dig a bit deeper to complete the multitude of tasks alone.

To give further clarification to all assigned tasks, Elise provides an all-inclusive list of her responsibilities as a one woman show. She also includes a dialogue between the superintendent and herself. She attempts to explain the number of items she has been tasked to lead and to explain her thoughts about such a heavy workload:

Under my umbrella, I have accountability, ARI, the system backup testing coordinator, compliance, monitoring, counseling, and guidance, CTE, curriculum, and instruction, for pre-K through 12, dyslexia, educational technology, educator effectiveness, ELL, federal programs, gifted grants, intern and practicum student placements, LEAD Alabama, library media, mental health, mentoring, PowerSchool, prevention and support services, professional learning, recruitment. The Special Education coordinator reports to me but special education services still fall under my umbrella. I went in, had a talk with the superintendent and I said, "I don't know what you envision for this position," I said, "But it is a lot." And so, he just encouraged me to hang in there. He said, "I understand that it's a lot, but I know that you're capable of doing it. I have all the confidence in the world that you can get it done, so I'm not worried." (Elise, p. 1)

Though the superintendent acknowledged the amount of responsibility, he did not offer any means of support. In fact, I contend he added a layer of intensity to onliness by not providing ample human resources. The social context of onliness is described by Turner (2002):

Women in the minority (in very small proportion) inhabit characteristics such as: becoming socially invisible, not to stand out, finding it harder to gain credibility, facing misperceptions of their identity and role in the organization, facing more personal stress and being stereotyped. (p. 76)

Actions such as these chip away at the confidence of the middle space leader. The responsibilities described by Elise echoed the point of view of responsibilities of Jeanes Supervisors from the early 1900s. Krause (2003) stated, “Their duties were numerous: they visited schools, encouraged teachers to improve their instruction with new methods and aids, recruited teachers, recommended teachers for hiring, developed in-service teacher training, corrected school registers, checked final reports, and worked with committeeman” (p. 201). As the Jeanes Supervisors of the 1900s sought to leverage assistance from their male superintendents and boards of education, the African American woman in district K-12 middle space leadership of 2021 continues to seek the same as she toils alone.

Mya

Mya recounts the process of beginning a new alternative program for juvenile students. The program would allow for students who were two to three grade levels behind an opportunity to receive clock hours through asynchronous learning. Due to the dropout rate of juveniles being an issue in the community during school hours while people are at work, the issue was a concern of the community; therefore, she met with judges and the mayor, also. She submitted an innovation waiver to the state department of education. The program proved successful to the point of expansion to the elementary level. Mya’s solo effort to construct a program, secure appropriate political alliances, and work with and between stakeholders is commonplace for the

middle space leaders. She simply works on her own to complete tasks. In other words, Mya states, “I just stay in a little box to myself. Whenever I’m given a task, I just do it” (Mya, p. 7).

Aubrey

Aubrey explains the environment of the district is not the same environment as the building level with students bustling about the place. She declares, “There is a difference and I think that you are more isolated” (Aubrey, p. 2). To add clarity to the point, she expounds on solo tasks assigned to her and how she navigates the experience:

I would say single handedly planned was our National Teacher of the Year, from 2019 coming to speak to our teachers. The flip of that was having a national comedian come and so again, I felt somewhat isolated in the whole planning of it, it was just presented, hey, we need to make this happen amongst other things.

(Aubrey, p. 7)

Although Aubrey readily refutes systems in place particularly to create isolating experiences due to her gender and or race, the researcher has opposing views. The comfort level of her superintendent to request the task and have an expectation the task will be completed gives the impression that operating in a spirit of onliness is routine. Aubrey went on to discuss how the faculty and staff enjoyed the comedian. The results of the solo work by an African American woman are enjoyed by others without fully acknowledging her investment which on its own merit is not an unusual occurrence in middle space leadership, and the African American woman is often more than willing to share her steps to success with others hoping to avoid the feeling of onliness. Cooper (2018) confirms this sentiment when she writes:

That’s kind of how it feels to be a Black woman. Like our victories belong to everyone, even though we do all the work. But here’s the thing-if I can master any force in my life

and slay it like Serena slays tennis balls on the court, then I'm happy to share the wealth.

(p. 7)

McKenzie

The participants as well as the researcher express the onliness of middle space differently, yet the meaning of the experience is common. As I interpret their experiences, I gather that Elise would explain it as a tough balancing act done on your own. Elise would describe it as a solo act which requires political and relational tactics. Aubrey would explain it as a space of eerie quietness without students but with loud demands of her responsibly to the district. McKenzie, through varied experiences, remained ready for it all. She was ready to take on every bit of each task alone and make sure everyone would know she was present and prepared to work on the task at hand.

McKenzie came to middle space in time when there were not many African Americans in leadership positions in K-12 school systems in Alabama let alone at the district office. Her tenacity to get to the table, even if alone, is commendable. She understood the foundation she was laying in the onliness as well as the pursuit for a greater cause for the many who would follow her as middle space leaders. Evans-Winters (2019) emphasizes this point, "Our intellectual and cultural pursuits allow us to move beyond being the keepers of secrets to being scholar-activists who choose to use our secrets to instigate social and community transformation" (p. 71).

Researcher's Autoethnographic Account. Very much like Alice Walker's experience of onliness, my experience of onliness has caused me to examine the working relationships within the district. As a result of my examination, I am baffled by the revolving door of African American teachers who enter the district and leave within two years. As the district's liaison to

the state department of education to report new teachers for mentoring purposes, I have a front row seat to this revolving door. Though I have never conducted a formal, local survey to gather data as to the exit, I have participated in numerous informal conversations and tearful sessions as African American teachers vent frustration about the lack of support for minority teachers. As a district middle space leader, I experience the same frustration and feel the angst of being a messenger in the middle in terms of wanting to share with their building level administrators their experiences. Again, I feel visible and voiceless. Because of my title and being in the space, I should have the authority to make the experience better for them, yet I stand there experiencing what they are experiencing because I am an African American woman in district middle space leadership--the only one in educational leadership and alone. Collins (1989) notes, "Black female scholars may know that something is true but be unwilling or unable to legitimate their claims using Eurocentric masculinist criteria for consistency with substantiated knowledge and Eurocentric masculinist criteria for methodological adequacy" (p. 753). This remains the case in instances where I am the only. Instances such as being the only during regularly scheduled board of education meetings and special called board of education work sessions. The tactic I have used to add levity is viewing the experiences as a dance. The middle space leader line dance. I have entered meetings as the "only" and attempt to figure out the power dynamics at play. I know that I am sensing a bit of exclusion, yet I ward off the thoughts and jump in line. Two steps into the meeting space, turn to my left to view the power seating arrangement, turn to right to listen to the loudest most influential voice, then back two steps to the schools, and jump into action with all the questions to follow. Repeat the dance while being loyal to the superintendent, understanding with the administrators, a listening ear to teachers, and a helpful, kind face to students!

Summary

Even when Black women are written into a storyline, we are often cast as characters with no evident depth or backstory, largely included as scaffolding to hold up narratives centered on whites. (Tyson, 2021, p. 267)

The model, actor, and author, Cicely Tyson penned those words in collaboration with Michelle Burford in her memoir, *Just as I Am*. Chapter four's analysis of experiences expressed by the study participants and the researcher yielded progress in the lives of African American professional women. I would argue, the African American woman district middle space leaders in this study revealed they are more than scaffolding for their white counterparts; however, they also revealed there is not much scaffolding for them. As the study participant, McKenzie so vividly stated, "When you are in a district and no matter how good you are at your job and how knowledgeable you are and prepared, others are not always prepared for you" (McKenzie, p. 6) Despite confrontations, the leaders of this study forge through, prepared for the work of the district. They are positioned for authority, visible to all yet voiceless to most. They relish having the knowledge and skillset to balance as messengers in the middle. Moreover, they succeed in the wake of onliness to achieve even greater success for the district.

Chapter 4b: Analysis of Navigation of District Middle Space Leadership

District middle space leadership provides opportunities for leaders to problem-solve, find resolutions, implement ideas, and support upper and lower-level leaders. Through an examination of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework (passage, challenges, location, roles, tasks, and mentoring relationships) the participants discuss navigation tactics to succeed as district middle space leaders. An analysis of the second research question is offered in this section.

Research Question 2

How do African American women navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems?

Passage

Treasure et al. (2013) stated:

Women who are successful in achieving their career goals do so because they are willing to take chances when opportunity knocks, even if success is not guaranteed. Having courage means taking the initiative to do something new despite the natural hesitancy that fear may produce.” (p. 55)

This courage has revealed itself as the educator has matriculated from classroom teacher to instructional leader to assistant principal to principalship. Ultimately, the educator has sojourned to the district office. In reviewing the middle space characteristics diagram subsections (Entry-Exit, Immersion-Emersion, Disintegration-Reintegration, and Transformation-Restabilization) identified in the passage frame of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (2009) middle space leadership diagram, entry is the most prevalent within the participant responses. Participants discussed the journey (entry) to middle space leadership as well as various roles within the space.

Elise

Elise taught for eleven years, and she held roles within those years as business department chair, career tech department chair, and assistant career tech director. After eleven years, she wanted to do something different and applied for an assistant principal's position at the secondary level. She was an assistant for three years. As she sought opportunities within her district to become a principal, she was told that the position which was available was at an elementary school. Secondary administration was the only school level administrative experience she had at that point; therefore, Elise was told she would not be considered for the position. This action caused her to pause and navigate what appeared to be denial of a position. Elise took another approach. She decided to think of ways that she could expand her knowledge and expertise in administration. Elise went out of the comfort zone of her school system and applied for an elementary assistant principal position with a school system unfamiliar to her. She was hired and transitioned to a new school system. She held the position of assistant principal for one year and was promoted to the central office to become the director of teaching and learning. The director's position was a new position for the district. She has since been in the position for two years. The passage to district middle space for Elise was not one of ease; however, she changed courses from her previous school system with grace and now reaps the benefits.

Mya

Mya's journey to the district office was not one of a traditional transition. As a matter of fact, Mya was a biology pre-med major with no desire to teach nor become an administrator. After being convinced to consider teaching as a means of making science relevant to students and armed with the knowledge that teaching in a Title I school can be an avenue for student loan forgiveness, Mya decided to teach. She spent five years in the classroom as a secondary science

teacher. The remaining ten years have been spent in various district level positions. Mya navigated her desire to introduce science to students K-12 and work behind the scenes as a district level administrator.

Aubrey

Also, like Elise, Aubrey dedicated eleven years in one role, assistant principal. After questioning her self-imposed limits, she decided to transition to another school system as the director of testing and special education. Aubrey realized that her old goals no longer suited her professional vision. Similar to Elise and Mya, Aubrey began steering the next steps of her journey. She began wondering if her role as assistant principal was one she wanted to continue until retirement. As stated in Aubrey's reflection on her experiences, she questioned her passage and setting limits:

I think you know in some ways that was the ceiling I sought for myself and I made for myself and so then of course as you see more, do more, then you dream a little bit more. In 1995 that was the level of dream and so I realized that I probably cut myself short not knowing at the time. Certainly, not to blame anybody or say that I think that was just. I'm going to say a casualty of not seeing more or different. (Aubrey, p. 3) Through process of questioning next steps, Aubrey gathered the appropriate information to leave her post as an assistant principal to become a district middle space leader.

McKenzie

Of the four study participants, McKenzie's passage is the most unconventional. McKenzie was working in banking when she heard one of her co-worker's children stumble over a reading passage and decided to become an educator to ensure students in her community would

have a solid literacy foundation. Although she thoroughly enjoyed thirteen years of being a classroom teacher, she searched for other roles to be more of an influence:

I loved teaching. I realized that I could do more than impact my classroom. How could I impact the entire school? “So that’s when I started to research other avenues to pursue. At the time, my school district did not have a specifically identified human resource department. (McKenzie, p. 3)

McKenzie was the first person to hold the position of director of human resources in the district. She was tasked with staffing the school system with more minority representation. The challenge in this task rested in navigating a school system which was predominately White and being the brown face of the district to ensure a diverse faculty and staff was established.

McKenzie understood the role to be one of collaboration and communication; therefore, she worked to build diverse communities within the organization.

Researcher’s Autoethnographic Account. My passage to district middle space leadership was similar to Elise’s passage. I always wanted to be a teacher. I pursued elementary education for my undergraduate and graduate degrees. After five years of teaching, I decided to obtain administrative certification to become an assistant principal. After completing certification and still teaching, I decided to continue learning about organizational structures and leadership to obtain an Ed.S. in instructional leadership. Fully armed with theory, it was time to apply this knowledge. I became an assistant principal of a middle school. After one year in the role, the principal was promoted to high school principal, and I had a decision to make. I stepped into the principalship but within a year and half, I decided to leave the position. I could not find my footing as the principal. Now, I realize I needed a mentor. I needed a person to call if I needed to shout, cry, garner advice or simply pray to ensure I could continue. Left to the voice in

my head, I felt that I was not meant to be a principal. Based on the feedback I received when I announced my departure, I was doing a great job. Well, it sure did not feel like it to me. I decided to apply for a job as an elementary school assistant principal in another district. Best decision ever! I loved the job, but, like McKenzie, I knew I could do more to assist the district. I noticed a missing element in the district; there was no one to align the district's curriculum K-12. Each principal was responsible for this task. After being an assistant principal for eight years, I filled the position of curriculum coordinator. The navigation of each role and my passage to district middle space leadership was filled with varying emotions. The best navigational tool I have used is to get busy planning and doing.

Location

The location of middle management lends itself to negotiating with and between senior and lower-level management. Salih & Doll (2013) argued, "Due to their structural positions, middle managers play a key role in managing resources, providing information to decision makers, giving emotional support to their subordinates, and communicating the strategic intent of senior management throughout the organization" (p. 37). In analyzing the middle space characteristics diagram subsections (Between Upper-Level Managers and Lower-Level Workers) identified in the location frame of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (2009) middle space leadership framework, negotiating support from the building level administrators versus support from the district office is the most common response. Aspects of finding a balance between upper and lower management was also articulated. Industry and corporate settings have defined leadership between upper and lower management as middle space leadership. Clegg and McAuley (2005) stated, "In the management literature the middle manager has a particular role as the pivot between the more strategic interests of senior management and the "local knowledge" of front-

line managers and employees” (p. 21). Although the premise of Clegg and McAuley’s research addressed middle management in higher education, the writing aligns to district middle space, as well. In the case of K-12 schools, senior management is the superintendent, and front-line managers are building level administrators. In many instances, following the superintendent, is a woman in command in a K-12 school system.

The study participants align to the Salih and Doll interpretation of middle managers’ structural positions. The space is bustling with ambiguity and loneliness, yet acts of heroism show up there, as well.

Elise

Elise stated, “Being there is a tough job, especially when you’re having to balance so many things” (p. 10). Elise’s navigation of the location is addressed by setting clear boundaries and adhering to them:

Clear set of boundaries. If you are going to be a leader that is going to be sustained in a position there has to be a cutoff point, and you have to be able to say no sometimes in order to preserve your personal time and space. (Elise, p. 8)

Mya

Mya operates as a negotiator in the location to benefit the district office as well as to be supportive of the administrators. “I still have to play mediator because I can’t give out too much information. And then I still have to be an advocate for those middle-school principals” (p. 15). In navigating the location effectively, Mya stresses the importance of effective communication. She states, “I try to always communicate in writing and follow up with a phone call just to ensure that they understand exactly what I’m asking” (p. 18).

Aubrey

Aubrey finds the location to be one of isolation. “If you are at the Central office, it can be where you are isolated from others. You are in your own office; therefore, not having student interactions and so the location itself can be stuffy” (p. 9). Although she describes the location as one of isolation, she readily admits that to be seen as an individual and not tied to any group is the way in which she navigates being a district middle space leader. “It is important to be seen as who I am not my race, and not my gender. My personal belief in how to navigate and to even be successful is to tie yourself to yourself and to your work” (p. 11).

McKenzie

Whereas Aubrey explains the isolation of the location, McKenzie discusses the lack of support rendered by building level administrators. She asserts, “I’m over here doing what the superintendent requests, the person who is supporting me. But when I get to the building level it’s not that way anymore” (p. 15). McKenzie’s navigational tool for the location is being represented even if not supported. “Sometimes you have to force your way into things and into the door to get that seat at the table and I have had to navigate a lot of different ways to get my seat at the table” (p. 16).

Researcher’s Autoethnographic Account. Throughout my tenure as a district middle space leader, I have struggled with and in some instances still struggle with many of the same issues mentioned by this study’s participants. They include but are not limited to the following: balance of priorities, loyalty to superintendent, negotiator, being isolated and the lack of support or understanding from the building level administrators. I navigate the location by being available to the superintendent as well as building level administrators. Available as a listening ear, available for the brainstorming of ideas, available to my multi-layered responsibilities as a district middle space leader. Though this strategy leaves me exhausted and filled with more

questions for which I could ever find answers, I have a sense of being that link in the chain to keep it all together.

Challenges

The journey to district level leadership positions for women is a challenge on its own merit. Young and McLeod (2001) argued, “a combination of a woman’s aspiration, experiences, and responses to those experiences is what ultimately determines her decision to enter or not to enter educational administration” (p. 469). In examining the middle space characteristics diagram subsections (Vertical Pressure, Lateral Pressure, Vertical and Lateral Pressure) identified in the challenges frame of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework, vertical and lateral pressure examples are communicated in participant responses. With the attainment of the position, the challenge of managing lateral pressure within the position and vertical pressure from the building level administrators is apparent.

Elise

District middle space leadership challenges faced by Elise centered around shifting organizational norms put in place by previous district level administration. Elise explained the vertical pressure by stating, “Getting people to understand that while we want you to have autonomy to do what it is that you feel is in the best interest of your students, there are still requirements that we have.” (p. 6). Although Elise was met with criticism for changes, she understood the teachers’ positions. She explained her strategy for navigating challenges such as the one presented. “I look at the situation, I think about who it involves and what are the possible consequences for whatever decision is made, and how it’s going to impact various stakeholders. And with all of those things in mind, just trying to make the best decision possible” (p. 7).

Mya

Mya's challenges in district middle space leadership are structured around lateral pressure from within the position. She terms this pressure as "adult behavior." I've had coworkers, again, adult behaviors, who want this vendor based on who they like, but it's not evidence or research based. That has been a challenge for me because you have to work with people who do things differently than you and differently does not mean that one way is right or wrong. It just means you have a difference of opinion. Mya navigates challenges by staying focused. "Treat everyone fair and to keep the main thing, the main thing in the mission and the goals. Inspect what you expect" (p. 13).

Aubrey

Aubrey considers herself a doer. Unfortunately, she finds people within the organization who do not share the same necessity to accomplish tasks. She explains, "if somebody is not moving as fast as I would like for them to move, then that can be an emotional challenge". Aubrey explains this as an emotional challenge because she is located or in position to have the authority to require administrators and teachers to move with urgency; however, Aubrey's authority is implied rather than enacted. Aubrey explains, "I'm going to say disappointment, as well, but being frustrated or being burnt out that certainly could be a challenge, not being able to move in the way you would like to move and still maintaining the presence, the loyalty, the dedication to the role, the person that you report to" (p. 6). Aubrey's strategy to navigate the challenges of district middle space is to create structures within the position. "It is important to have a set of procedures for just everything. If you have your protocols set up and your procedures, then it makes things on the back end a whole lot easier. To avoid challenges, first observe, then establish procedures and protocols" (p. 8).

McKenzie

McKenzie, the eldest of the study participants and the only former veteran district middle space leader, attributes the challenges faced to being an African American woman. She expresses the challenges of the location:

Well for me, being an African-American woman number one is a challenge. When I became the director, it was the first time ever that they had a director of human resources, and I happened to be a person of color, African-American. And so, that in itself was a challenge. I was young and I was female. There were people in the district a lot longer and had a lot more teaching experience and education experience than myself. I had been there a total of thirteen years by then so with that being said, I faced those challenges” (McKenzie, p. 4).

While responses from McKenzie do not identify the challenges as lateral or vertical, the challenges appear to be within her awareness of being an African American woman. McKenzie had a firm awareness of how her gender and race would increase the opportunity for colleagues to take issue with her leadership. Just as Behar (2003) asserted, “Feminist awareness is always complicated by the numerous contradictions that emerge for women in attempting any kind of speaking or self-representation” (p.19). McKenzie’s approach to navigating challenges in district middle space leadership is being present to the moment. “There are going to be challenges, never forget who you are, never forget how you got to where you are” (p. 11).

Researcher’s Autoethnographic Account. The most challenging aspect to being a district middle space leader for me is the ambiguity of the location. For example, even after I know I have a firm understanding of an issue including background information and necessary stakeholders, I halt my actions. I pause and wonder about the questions or pushback I am going

to receive. I meditate on possible outcomes based on vertical pressures from the superintendent and the building level administrators and think of ways to be responsive to actions of both entities. I navigate this challenge by focusing not on the ambiguity. I focus, instead, on what I know must be done. I put my energy toward the goals, bring the appropriate people to the table, and set action steps in place to accomplish the goals.

Tasks

The variation of tasks performed by each study participant hinged on the organizational structure and the size of the district. In studying the middle space characteristics diagram subsections (Subordinates, Superiors, Equals, Delegators, and Doers) identified in the tasks frame of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework, being a doer and having the systems in place to complete tasks are the most common experiences of participants. The responsibilities described by Burch and Danley (1980) resonate with today's district middle space leaders. The authors explained, "Activities such as keeping up-to-date through reading, visiting and attending professional meetings; sharing relevant and available information about new ideas and practices; and being available to people who need information" (p. 30).

Elise

Elise is responsible for a myriad of tasks within the district; however, the area most crucial of all assigned is creating, organizing, and implementing effective professional learning. Elise declared, "professional development is one of the most critical things in improving teacher effectiveness" (p. 1). She is also active in professional development organizations and serves on professional panels to support novice aspiring administrators and novice administrators. Although she is a doer and believes in collaborating to accomplish tasks, Elise finds it necessary

to navigate appropriate means by declining additional tasks. “Set boundaries and know when to say enough is enough. I feel I have more tasks than one person should have. My plate is full. I can’t take on another task” (Elise, p. 5).

Mya

Mya’s tasks are core subject-driven due to her specific role as district science instructional specialist. She has the opportunity to put her love for and knowledge of science in action. Mya is responsible for facilitating science curriculum selection for secondary schools. She has direct contact with all administrators and building level specialists to implement resources. She also interacts with students as they explore science resources she led the charge to secure. Though these tasks are varied, Mya has a system for success:

To navigate through the workflow, always organize your daily tasks because there’s always things to work on daily. Organize your tasks first because sometimes, you have tasks that are more pertinent than the others. Also, you can’t put your work before what your supervisor asks you to do. (p. 22)

Aubrey

Special education services, district testing, and coordinating K-12 curriculum are the three largest tasks allocated to Aubrey. Although tasks associated with K-12 curriculum coordinator were added to the list of responsibilities when Aubrey accepted the job, she has the confidence and willingness to move forward in the position. Her mindset regarding the task is to get it done. Dweck (2016) described such action noting, “Those with the growth mindset found success in doing their best, in learning and improving. And this is exactly what we find in the champions” (p. 98). Aubrey found ways to champion responsibilities and navigate tasks as assigned:

Have some type of management system. For me, writing things down is key. Definitely being organized, keeping a calendar, keeping a journal and being able to see the big picture. You've got to have something that keeps you organized and knowing what's next, what's to come and what it is that you're trying to achieve. (Aubrey, p. 14)

McKenzie

McKenzie's primary tasks as a district leader started with recruitment because of the need to recruit and diversify the district more. She explains, "The first part was to develop a human resources office before I could recruit. I had no staff. It was just me, and I was able to utilize the superintendent's secretary as my secretary, as well" (p. 9). McKenzie also notes the tasks as they related to her gender and race:

I think that as you move, as African American or any woman moves into a district office position whether the middle level or high, you've got to understand and be humble enough to know that you still have to do some of those clerical skills and some of the tasks that some may deem mediocre, but they're not. (McKenzie, p.9)

In a sense, McKenzie applies gifts of the spirit as navigational tools for accomplishing tasks as a human resource director. "I would say, be patient, be tolerant, understanding, always flexible, but more importantly, pick your battles. Some things are not worth fighting for, but there are others that are really worth fighting for" (p. 10).

Researcher's Autoethnographic Account. The tasks I have been assigned as a district middle space leader run the gamut. K-12 curriculum, district accreditation, professional learning, mentoring liaison, counselor coordinator, librarian coordinator, and textbook (print and digital) adoption are some of the most pressing areas of concern in my position. I've never been one to complain about the number of tasks I am expected to complete; however, I do question the

effectiveness of the implementations due to the workload. Burke (2014) asked, “Are some employees overloaded in their jobs and others not, or is it true that most people are overworked and an increase in hiring is warranted?” (p.86). As a district middle space leader, I have a good view of the workload allocated to faculty and staff; therefore, the latter of Burke’s question holds true for my district. To navigate the number of tasks, I gauge the urgency of each task and work accordingly. It is all important; therefore, I tell myself, “Well, I can’t get it done without doing it!”

Roles

The roles assigned to district middle space leaders range from quite manageable to extremely complex. In probing the middle space characteristics diagram subsections (Bridger, Buffer, Boundary, and Spanner) identified in the role frame of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework, all subsections are communicated in participant responses whether explicitly stated or implied. For instance, the word mediator was often used by participants. District middle space leaders are typically assigned such roles not limited to the following: textbook coordinator, professional development coordinator, human resources director, K-12 curriculum coordinator, Title IX coordinator, state department teacher mentoring liaison, PreK-6 elementary curriculum coordinator, 7-12 secondary curriculum coordinator, special education director, federal programs director, district accreditation facilitator, counseling coordinator, library media coordinator, and technology director. A study conducted by Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) asked two major questions regarding middle space, “Who am I, and what should I do, in this middle? (p. 125). The questions are answered based on the immediate needs of the district. Elise, Mya, Aubrey, and McKenzie revealed primarily what they do as it relates to roles in the district and how they navigated the roles. Each discussed varied naming of positions,

support within the roles, the multiple layers of responsibilities regarding the roles, and the pay associated with roles in district middle space leadership.

Elise

Director of teaching and learning is Elise's official title. Throughout Elise's responses, examples of how she bridges varying aspects of her roles to meet the needs of the district come forward. She has operated in the position for two years. The following areas are under her direct supervision: federal programs coordinator, district ELL coordinator, the special education coordinator, gifted coordinator, elementary education coordinator, preK director who is also the elementary principal, career and technical education director, ARI coach, mental health coordinator, counseling staff, and library media staff. Elise met with the superintendent regarding a title change which reflects her level of responsibility in the district. He informed her that eventually the position would evolve into an assistant superintendent title. Elise expresses advice to navigate titles and compensation related to roles:

Have the voice to express your concerns about titles. If you're doing the work, I feel the title should go according to the work that's being done. There is pay that goes along with those titles too. Finding your voice to have those crucial conversations about roles and responsibilities and the titles and the pay that goes along with it. (p. 7)

Mya

Mya's middle space journey has afforded her the opportunity to lead curriculum efforts as an alternative school improvement specialist, intervention team leader, and instructional support partner for middle schools throughout the district. Mya reflects on her role as the alternative school improvement specialist:

You would think that they would have put a male there because it is an alternative school. But they specifically wanted a female there at the location. I was informed they thought that a female would do better with planning curriculum and creating programs and moving students academically I think that the perception in my district is that males are better with discipline, and the females are better with the curriculum, the instruction, the planning. (p. 25)

Mya has been a buffer between roles in the district. She offers the strategy to navigate multiple roles by saying, “Sometimes you have to do things that are not in your job description to learn and get the experience. They may look like volunteering, serving on different committees, and building that confidence and being competent in that content area” (p 26).

Aubrey

The official title for Aubrey’s position is special education, assessment, and curriculum coordinator. Aubrey’s role has not changed in the district since joining the school system. In addition to the aforementioned areas of responsibility, she facilitates the supervision of teachers and administrators which involves observations and evaluations. Aubrey acknowledges that the title invokes her need to know about several components across the districts (spanner). To navigate the role, Aubrey believes in jumping into action and start working. “I am a doer. There are a lot of different aspects of the three areas of responsibility that I have and so I’m just a roll-up-my-sleeves kind of person and let’s get it done” (p. 15).

McKenzie

As the first person to hold the position in her district, former veteran district middle space leader McKenzie’s formal title was human resources coordinator. McKenzie was responsible for establishing policy and procedures regarding boundary within roles for the district. In doing so,

she experienced boundaries of middle space leadership from the district's perspective to the building level perspective. Within the next year, the role morphed into a director's position. She eventually transitioned to a larger district as an executive director and carried out many of the same responsibilities regarding human resource concerns. At the time of McKenzie's departure from middle space leadership, her title was chief officer of human resources. To navigate the varying roles within district middle space leadership, McKenzie advises:

Always reflect back and never forget why you chose this profession. Step back and have reflective moments each and every evening. Continue self-development. Join local, state and national professional organizations so that you can learn what other people are doing around the country that can help impact what you can bring to your own district by tweaking, but to make it better and to make your district better. (p. 16)

Researcher's Autoethnographic Account. My district middle space roles have expanded over the course of my seven-year tenure. At the onset of my middle space journey, my official title was curriculum coordinator. The major aspects of the role included K-12 curriculum, textbooks, assessment, facilitator for district reading specialist, district accreditation, professional development, and supervision of administrators. After two years in the position, I discussed the need for assessment to be delegated to someone else in the district. The superintendent granted the request. With assessment off my plate, I was assigned counseling coordinator and library media coordinator along with the previously stated duties of the role. After my fourth year in the position and with the formerly mentioned duties, the role of district's teacher mentoring liaison was assigned to me. I collaborated with the other middle space leader at the district to request a title change from coordinator to assistant superintendent. The superintendent granted the request without an increasing pay. This was an appreciated title

change to add credibility to the position. After six years, with a new superintendent and all the previously stated duties, Title IX coordinator and alternative school coordinator responsibilities were assigned to me. The superintendent and I negotiated a title to accurately reflect my responsibilities in the district as well as an increase in pay. My official title is deputy superintendent of curriculum and instruction. I have learned to utilize distributed leadership practices to successfully navigate and bridge each role. I have teams of leaders in each school with which I collaborate to accomplish goals in the district. I remain open to the possibilities of each role; however, as a veteran middle space leader, I finally recognize my limitations.

Mentoring Relationships

Middle space leaders with assigned mentoring duties or who have experienced being mentored fair better in the role. Those assigned mentoring duties gain the experience and knowledge required to mentor effectively. Those being mentored develop a support system and are retained more often in leadership positions. In analyzing subsections (Peers and Colleagues, Upper Management, Lower-Level Workers, and Mentoring) identified in the mentoring relationships frame of Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework, support from peers and colleagues and mentoring were frequent in participant responses.

There are varied structures to developing a mentoring program. Mullen (2008, as cited in Reames, 2018) offers a framework for mentoring:

Mentoring can take place in informal ways or in formal programs. Formal mentoring programs offer mentors a personal and professional learning opportunity in a structured, planned way that also has desirable outcomes for the organization in which the mentees are situated. (p. 217)

The study participants have varying mentoring experiences. Each was asked to describe their mentor (formal or informal) regarding race and gender and give specifics of the mentoring experience.

Elise

Elise describes her formal mentor:

My superintendent did partner me with Dr. Wood (pseudonym), a White female at the state department. During my first year, we would have monthly meetings, but then the state department got really busy. But I do feel like if I need something or if I have questions about something that I could still reach out to her. She would help mentor me through whatever it is that I'm going through. (p.8)

Elise goes on to describe her informal mentor:

I have one that's a very close friend of mine, black female. We have similar roles, and so, I reach out to her all the time to ask how things are going. Also, I inquire about what plans her system has in place for certain things that are coming down the pipeline. (p.9)

Elise has been positioned to receive mentoring from a leader at the Alabama State Department of Education. She is also receiving mentoring from another district middle space leader who shares similar responsibilities. With these partnerships, Elise is destined for a successful middle space tenure. Just as Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010) suggested, "Women seeking leadership positions are encouraged to align themselves with mentors who are experienced in their careers and with those who possess qualities for achieving successful outcomes" (p. 3). To navigate developing and or maintaining a mentor relationship, Elise advises:

Find a mentor if one is not provided for you. Find a mentor and preferably one that looks like you and can understand the struggles that we may encounter. This person may have a better understanding of what you deal with on a day-to-day basis and can relate. (p. 9)

Mya

Mya describes two informal mentoring experiences. The first mentoring relationship was developed by Mya asking another district leader, an African American woman, to teach her how to complete a summer school budget. The leader offered assistance and has been Mya's informal mentor since that time. Informal mentoring to the point that Mya declared, "She doesn't even know that she is. She was willing to show me so I could get the experience, and I was willing to learn. And, so she is my unofficial person" (p. 28). The second informal mentor for Mya is an African American, male superintendent. Mya explains that the mentor is a superintendent in a rural county. She calls him first to speak privately in relation to her next career move. Although Mya does not have a formal mentor, she has established two relationships that will assist her along the journey of middle space leadership and beyond. Mya notes, that the informal female mentor shares her work ethic and morals as well as her desire to support other African American women. Mya recommends navigating a developing mentoring relationship as follows:

Choose your own mentor. Choose someone who has the experience in your goals, in what you're trying to accomplish. You may see when they are mentoring you, there's some things you want to take away from them and there are some you don't. I always believe that it's a lesson in every lesson. (Mya, p. 30)

Aubrey

Aubrey shares Mya's experience as no formal mentor has been assigned to her; however, she has established an informal mentoring relationship with a colleague. The informal mentor is

a senior member of the district's leadership team, a White female. Aubrey explains the nature of the mentoring relationship, "By virtue of, one, physical location, our offices are side by side. Two, one of my responsibilities was previously assigned to her. And thirdly, she probably is a fifteen-to-twenty-year veteran of the school district" (p.16). Aubrey expounds regarding the navigation of developing mentoring relationships:

I think colleagues who have similar responsibilities as I do have in some ways become mentors. I know a lot of times you see mentors as being sort of a hierarchy, you have a mentor, you have a mentee, but I definitely think that colleagues that I've had or colleagues that I met at workshops or conferences are in some way may definitely be an informal mentoring relationship. As educators we should always be willing to share. It is incumbent upon us to model what we expect from the discipline of teaching and learning and so having a mentor whether it is an official role or unofficial role. (p. 16)

McKenzie

McKenzie, like Elise, was assigned a formal mentor. She was fortunate to have been assigned a formal mentor within the district and outside of the district. McKenzie recalls the experience:

I did have one and it was a female. Her title was assistant superintendent and she was a Caucasian female. That was within the district, but at the same time I was assigned a mentor outside of the district. The first day I was on my job there was a sexual harassment situation that came up. I immediately was assigned a second mentor that same day which was an attorney, Caucasian, male. He mentored and coached me on investigations. (p. 16)

McKenzie understood the wealth of professional learning she was receiving through deliberate, formal mentoring. McKenzie advises navigating and maintaining a mentor relationship by saying, “At the district level, you need that mentor, mentee and the knowledge and the expertise that they have to be able to grow professionally” (p. 23).

Researcher’s Autoethnographic Account. The mentoring experience I have cultivated is similar to Mya. I was not assigned a mentor; however, I desperately desired to have someone to brainstorm ideas, check in with, ask for guidance, and receive assurance. During my first year at the district office, the department of education began facilitating regional quarterly meetings. During these meetings, I observed other women, particularly African American women. I listened intently to questions asked by each participant. I watched interactions and responses to interactions. I settled on a potential mentor who worked in a neighboring district. I called her seeking assistance with the workflow of my responsibilities. She invited me to come to her office and talk with her regarding my role. That was six years ago. She has since transitioned from district middle space leadership to a position at the department of education. She has continued to reach out to me to offer support. Now, I have become an informal mentor to other women in the district. Being a mentor fulfills me like none other! It is my opportunity to give back. Navigating the process of finding a mentor and being a mentor has been one of an evolution for me. Through my observations, women, especially African American women, tend to wear a heavy “I’m okay” garment layered with a heavier coat of “No, I have it all under control.” Both the garment and the coat can be a little bit lighter with a mentor. I would advise any district middle space leader to do the following regarding mentoring relationships: seek a mentor, ask questions constantly, and accept advice or assistance offered by the formal or informal mentor.

Summary

This chapter captures the experiences and the navigation of those experiences by the study participants and the researcher as African American women in district middle space leadership. The life story questions protocol gave way to authentic expressions regarding Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (2009) middle space leadership framework (passage, challenges, location, tasks, role, and mentoring relationship).

The first three of the six characteristics (passages, challenges, and location) provided a window into the journey, being in the district office, and working through concerns of district level leadership. The passages taken by these leaders were similar in that each one experienced teaching in some capacity. Also, none of the study participants held the position of building level principal. Study participants found location to be one where the leader must develop skill sets for the following: balancing the workflow of the location, understanding the act of mediation, dealing with being isolated, and working through issues without adequate support. The area of challenges of district middle space leadership were revealed by study participants as the following: shifting norms in an organization, redirecting nonproductive adult behaviors, operating in a position of authority while lacking authority simply for being an African American woman in leadership.

The latter of the six characteristics (tasks, roles, and mentoring relationships) offered an opportunity to gain insight to the daily responsibilities, the varied leadership titles, and the workings of those titles while gaining support in rather unconventional ways as district level leaders. The overall tasks assigned to study participants were numerous. The common factor for three of the four participants as well as for the researcher was the responsibility of curriculum development. The roles for each participant reflected a district leadership title such as

coordinator, director, chief officer, and executive director. Each participant discussed the mechanics of their title as well as the responsibilities associated with the roles. Formal mentoring relationships were orchestrated by their districts for two of the four study participants. In the other two cases and with the researcher, informal mentoring relationships were crafted.

Middle space leadership in K-12 school systems is a vital aspect of the organization. This chapter disclosed the dichotomy of district middle space leadership through the lens of African American women. The experiences of the study participants were multifaceted and so were the ways in which they effectively navigate the space with appropriate knowledge and guidance.

As a researcher, I witnessed strength in all study participants. Each story shared empowers me to continue serving as a district middle space leader. I liken the district middle space leaders of this study to those described by Oshry (2016):

Middles who stay out of the middle, who empower themselves and others, who are Top when they can be, who are Bottom when they should be, who coach and who facilitate, and above all else, who integrate with one another-these are a different order of Middle. They value themselves and they bring value to their systems. (p. 98)

Chapter 5: Results, Conclusion, and Recommendations

This study was conducted to explore middle space leadership in the context of K-12 public schools as experienced by African American women. The conceptual framework of middle space leadership and theory of Black feminist thought were utilized to research this study. Life story interviewing allowed the researcher to form a rich, in-depth understanding of study participants. The study consisted of two research questions:

1. What are the experiences of African American women as district middle space leaders in K-12 school systems?
2. How do African American women navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems?

The researcher employed qualitative research methods throughout the study. Life story interviewing guided the questioning protocol for middle space leadership themes. The analyses were presented in chapter 4 (part a: experiences and part b: navigation). This chapter included a discussion of the results in relation to the literature, limitations, implications, recommendations for future research, creation of the K-12 middle space leadership diagram (African American women), overall significance, and conclusion.

Summary of Results

The findings were collected by facilitating two forty-five-minute virtual interview sessions for three of the participants. The fourth participant's virtual interview was one session for an hour and a half. The participants include one novice middle space leader (three or fewer years in the position), two veteran middle space leaders (four or more years in the position), and one former district middle space leader (served in the position for a minimum of three years). The researcher's, a veteran district middle space leader, experiences and navigation of those

experiences were gathered, as well. The researcher attempted to illuminate the journey of African American women in each phase of district middle space leadership and beyond.

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

Question 1

How do African American women experience district middle space leadership?

Experiences of the study participants varied depending on the phase of middle space leadership (novice, veteran, and or former). As noted throughout, functioning as a middle space leader is a very complex responsibility. Henning and Jardim (1977, as cited in Wentling, 2003) argued:

The middle manager's job is to coordinate with counterparts in other functional areas to see that the work of his or her own group or department is related as effectively as possible to the immediate objectives and operations of the enterprise; and it is primarily for this broad task that he or she is held responsible. (p. 313)

The novice, veteran, and former district middle space leaders all related their works to the mission of their respective districts. Within completing the work, they found experiences aligned to gender and race. This alignment formed four perceptions from the data. These perceptions were: Being African American and Woman, Visible Voicelessness, Messenger in the Middle, and Onliness and Loneliness of Solo Work.

Intersection-Being African and Woman

Black feminist thought author, Patricia Hill Collins, remains unwavering in her attempts to implore African American women to share their stories. Collins (2009) declared:

Black women intellectuals are 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, should we choose to embrace it. It is more likely for Black women, as members of an oppressed group, to have critical insights into the condition of our oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures. (p. 39)

The perceptions as noted by study participants provide a comprehensive scope of experiences as African American women K-12 district middle space leaders. These experiences express how the intersection of being African American and woman informed the participants' professional journey. Three of the participants (Elise, Mya, and McKenzie) shared examples of how being African American and women influenced their experiences. Aubrey questions the stance of race and gender being perceived as a negative. From her purview, school systems replace leaders with those who are similar to the person exiting the position; therefore, she replaced an African American woman and questions race and gender when discussing entrance into leadership.

Visible Voicelessness

The participants all shared experiences of being invisible and or voiceless in the context of appropriate authority, salary, title, and respect. Treasure et al. (2013) noted, "it's important for women to speak up when they identify policies or workplace practices that exclude women or cause them to be overlooked" (p. 56). The emotional balancing act of being seen in the district but not heard was a common theme across responses. Participants expressed the urgency to speak up when needed, to make a seat at the table if one is not there, and to make sure worth is compensated; however, also of note was that having the courage to do so is not easily attained.

Messenger in the Middle

The study participants gave accounts of experiencing varied states as district middle space leaders such as the following: ambiguity in the middle, loyalty to the superintendent, twist

and between the superintendent and building level administrators, and being a buffer. Salih and Doll (2013) argued the point that “Due to their structural positions, middle managers play a key role in managing resources, providing information to decision makers, giving emotional support to their subordinates, and communicating the strategic intent of senior management throughout the organization” (p. 37).

Onliness and Loneliness of Solo Work

Being the “only” is a common work experience for women in leadership positions. Being an African American woman in leadership increases the chances of being the “only” and completing work in a solo capacity. Turner (2002) notes:

women in the minority (in very small proportion) inhabit characteristics such as: becoming socially invisible, not to stand out, finding it harder to gain credibility, facing misperceptions of their identity and role in the organization, facing more personal stress and being stereotyped. (p. 76)

The study participants validate the preceding citation by expressing experiences of isolation, onliness, overly assigned duties, and a need for balance within district middle space leadership.

The researcher found each of the four perceptions (Being African American and Woman, Visible Voicelessness, Messenger in the Middle and Onliness and Loneliness of Solo Work) to be representative of district middle space leadership. The most interesting aspect of the results were the varying responses as it related to each participant’s tenure in district middle space leadership. The perception, which cut across all participants, was visible voicelessness. The researcher attributes this to the contradiction of the space. The researcher and study participants have obtained advanced degrees, worked consistently to improve the district, and handled

multiple projects on a routine bases; however, they noted that they were seen and not heard on too many occasions (visible voicelessness).

Question 2

How do African American women navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems?

Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework (passage, challenges, roles, location, tasks, and mentoring relationships) guided the research of navigating district middle space leadership. The study participants discussed the goals and the journeys which lead them to district middle space leadership. Each participant navigated the journey through preparation and the willingness to continue being lifelong learners of educational leadership. Burch and Danley(1980) explained, “Activities such as keeping up-to-date through reading, visiting and attending professional meetings; sharing relevant and available information about new ideas and practices; and being available to people who need information” (p. 30).

Throughout the responses, the ability to navigate challenges, tasks, and the roles within district middle space leadership was relegated to having an organized management system, being prepared to step into the next role, and remaining courageous. Treasure et al.(2013) stated:

Women who are successful in achieving their career goals do so because they are willing to take chances when opportunity knocks, even if success is not guaranteed. Having courage means taking the initiative to do something new despite the natural hesitancy that fear may produce. (p. 55)

The six characteristics as organized in Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (2009) middle space leadership framework are all vital as aspects of district middle space leadership; however, I would contend the most critical for African American women is establishing and nurturing

mentoring relationships. Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010) suggested, “Women seeking leadership positions are encouraged to align themselves with mentors who are experienced in their careers and with those who possess qualities for achieving successful outcomes” (p. 3). Though two of the four participants were assigned formal mentors, participants shared navigation strategies to acquire informal mentors. With the exception of Aubrey, the consensus of the participants was to seek out an African American woman as a mentor. In doing so, the participants asserted that there will be more commonality with the mentor. Moreover, they noted the mentor would be better understanding of experiences as an African American woman. Aubrey, however, held to her stance of showing up as you are and tying yourself to yourself, not to your gender nor your race. Aubrey also expressed the responsibility of leaders to present as teachers and learners; therefore, opportunities to mentor as well as to be mentored will be made available.

Limitations

Ample time with each participant to provide in-depth responses and follow up responses was the primary limitation. Three of the four study participants are currently employed as district middle space leaders; therefore, disclosure of intimate work experiences was a limitation. The study consisted of a region in the southeastern area of one state, four participants and the research’s autoethnographic account; hence, results could not be generalized. Lastly, none of the four participants had experience as a building administrator; therefore, limitations within responses regarding vertical pressure from the district level to the building level administrator’s position may exist.

Implications and Recommendation for Practice

This study added to the body of research regarding middle space leadership in the context of K-12 school systems. Study participants and the researcher offered strategies for novice and veteran leaders. In addition to novice and veteran district middle space leaders, the former district middle space leader offered tactics for leaders as they transition from K-12 to other professional opportunities. Additionally, exposure to and application of the Black feminist thought as a supporting theory was explored. Results of this study through the lens of African American novice, veteran and former women leaders will support the professional growth of African American women as they enter, work within, and exit the space.

Superintendents and other district leaders can use this research as a landing space to begin recognizing and understanding the varied experiences of African American women in K-12 district middle space leadership positions. Areas such as mentoring, opportunities for leadership, workload assignments, office dynamics, and unintentional biases may be addressed as a result of this study. Furthermore, superintendents may use the results of this study as a discussion board around appropriate compensation in relation to the number of roles assigned. Lastly, it has been well-documented in this study that the title associated with the leader holds value. If not monetary value, applied authority and an acknowledgement of the roles and responsibilities of the position are needed. Superintendents are well within their authority to ensure the title of each district middle space leader is reflective of the position.

Explanation of Revised Conceptual Framework

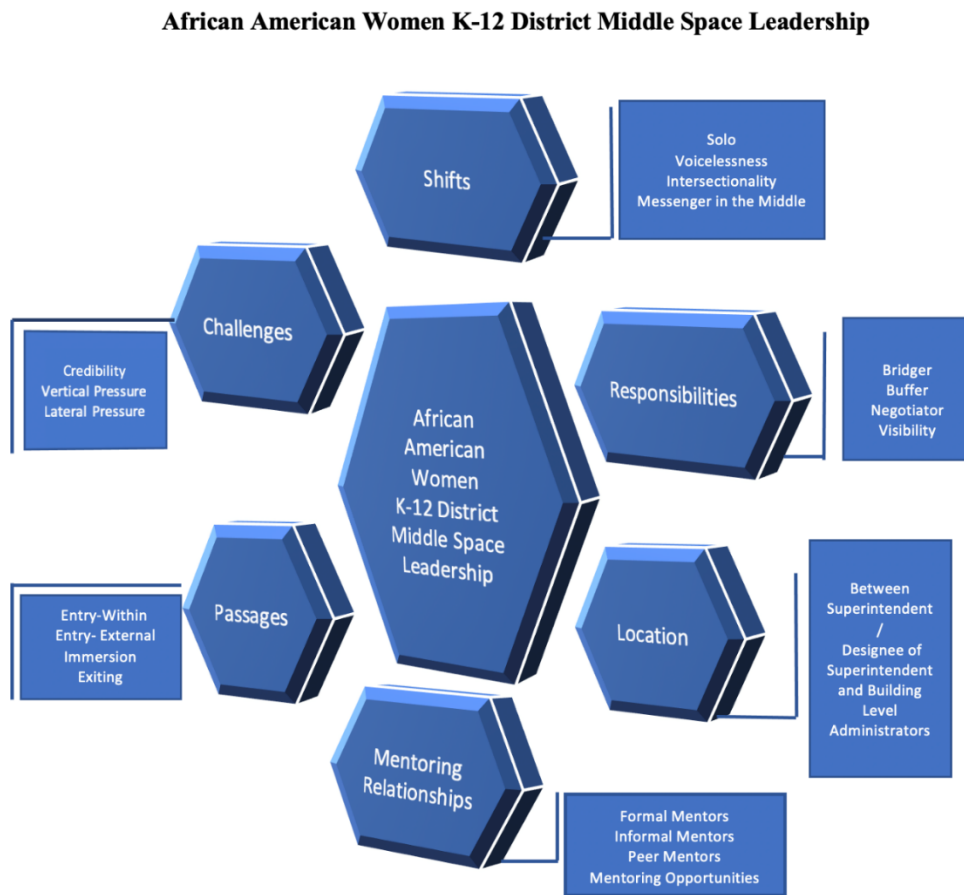
The data encouraged a revised diagram of middle space leadership to include K-12 district middle space leadership. Though the participant sample was limited, the revised diagram is specific to African American women in K-12 district middle space leadership. The researcher

sought areas of correlation between Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (2009) middle space leadership framework and a revised African American women K-12 district middle space leadership framework. The revised framework incorporates Black feminist thought tenet, Self-Definition (visibility) as well as traditional middle space leadership themes. The framework includes original characteristics: Challenges, Passages, Mentoring Relationships, and Location. The characteristic of roles and tasks as presented in Armstrong (2009) and Oshry (1993) middle space leadership framework have been collapsed into an overarching characteristic based on study data. The label of Responsibilities as a new characteristic captures the participants experiences regarding assigned tasks as well as the multiple roles assigned to the positions. Aligned to the participant responses, a new characteristic, Shifting as a characteristic has been added to represent the experiences of African American women in district middle space leadership. In correlation with participant responses, four subsections representing shifts have been added (solo, voicelessness, intersectionality, and messenger in the middle). Messenger in the middle is aligned to shifts due to the African American's woman experiences of being the messenger in the middle more so than adhering to a role or responsibility as a district middle space leader. Responsibilities, formerly tasks and roles yield four subsections (bridger, buffer, negotiator, visibility). Each of these subsections were articulated throughout participant responses. The subsections for Location were adjusted as well to support results of the study. The participants' shared experiences of navigating the location between the superintendent or the superintendent's designee and the building level administrators. The experiences noted required collaboration between the positions of superintendent and building level administrators. The conceptual framework has been adjusted to appropriately reflect the district middle space leader's location. The subsections for passages were consolidated to better connect with

participant experiences (Entry-Within, Entry-External, Immersion, Exiting). The Challenges subsection was adjusted as a better representation of African American women experiences (credibility, vertical pressure, lateral pressure). Mentoring Relationships has been changed to reflect the following: formal, informal, peer and colleague mentors, and mentoring opportunities. The researcher anticipates the revised conceptual framework to be utilized in discussing K-12 district middle space leadership in the context of experiences and navigational strategies of those experiences for all scholars, but especially African American women.

Figure 2

Revised Conceptual Framework: African American Women K-12 District Middle Space Leadership



Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The process of conducting this research broadened my overall understanding of middle management. The complexities of middle space management through the lens of African American women in K-12 leadership were far greater than I imagined. Study participants shared accomplishments and struggles within the space. Race and gender were the backdrop for several experiences and the way in which the experiences were navigated; however, one participant particularly held to her belief of ‘tying yourself to yourself’ and not necessarily to your race nor gender as a successful leader. Participant responses lead to several inquiries for future research. I am curious about other subgroups operating as district middle space leaders in K-12 school systems.

1. Due to limited study participants, future research concerning African American women in district middle leadership positions is needed.
2. Future research regarding African American women district middle space leaders without administrative certification would add to existing middle space literature, as well. Potential research participants would include but are not limited to the following: chief school finance officer, child nutrition directors, technology coordinators, and maintenance directors.
3. Research conducted considering mentoring structures in K-12 school systems for African American women district middle space leaders is needed to provide adequate support systems for African American women leaders.

Overall Significance

The overall significance of this study is to delve into the complexity of middle space leadership in the context of K-12 school systems. In addition to the position, the way in which African

American women cultivate knowledge and their experiences as leaders of district middle space leadership has been one of great significance. The results of the study are significant to all women with an emphasis on women of color due to the number of women advancing in district leadership. The data are reflective of day-to-day experiences through the following perceptions: Intersection-Being African and Women, Onliness and Loneliness of Solo Work, Messenger in the Middle, and Visible Voicelessness. These perceptions validate the experiences of the study participants, but they also speak to a great number of African American women experiencing the same plight.

Conclusion

African American women in present leadership positions have excelled in some instances yet remain static in other areas. It is the researcher's conviction to encourage all African American women to stay abreast of the latest research, to speak up and out regarding their interests, and to have the courage to become and remain visible. This courage comes at a price. The price of being even more excluded from opportunities or being perceived as an unwilling team member due to objections of the majority is a common lived experience. The participants and the researcher acknowledge the upward trajectory of our careers; however, we all find it necessary to take part in conversations that may be of help to other African American women in leadership. Participation in this study is to aide in support for the superintendent and the building level administrator who are presented with opportunities to work in collaboration with district middle space leaders and especially African American woman in the position. In addition to the superintendent and building level administrators finding the study useful, the researcher intends for the study to be a call to action regarding mentoring for African American women in all capacities, especially in K-12 school systems.

African American women in district middle space leadership should seek opportunities to be mentored as well as to mentor other African American women. This plea is not an attempt to exclude any subgroup; however, it is to elevate the need for mentorship as it relates to African American women. As an educator in the state of Alabama for nearly thirty years, I have observed the changing landscape of K-12 leadership to be more inclusive of African American women; however, what is being done to support, guide, and mentor the journeys of current and potential leaders? The words of Anna Julia Cooper ring just as true today as they did in 1892:

What a responsibility then to have the sole management of the primal lights and shadows!
Such is the colored woman's office. She must stamp weal or woe on the coming history of this people. May she see her opportunity and vindicate her high prerogative. (p. 76)

As K-12 district middle space leaders, the opportunity is now for African American women. The opportunity to become visible with a voice is now. Her voice, as a district leader, to make meaningful decisions for the majority and marginalized. The opportunity is now for African American women to seek out mentors (regardless of gender or ethnicity) and offer mentoring (regardless of gender or ethnicity). The opportunity is now for African American women to define ourselves for ourselves as knowledgeable, successful, nurturing, and effective leaders of K-12 school systems. The opportunity is now for African American women leaders of today to replicate the Jeanes Supervisors of the late 1900s. The Jeanes were critical to that period of time as educators, leaders, mentors, and role models. African American women in today's leadership positions have the same responsibility of ensuring success for the next generation of leaders, especially, African American women leaders. Understanding leadership is a privilege that is not to be taken for granted nor squandered; the time is now!

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Appendix A



AUBURN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS AN IRB APPROVAL STAMP WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN APPLIED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

INFORMATION LETTER

For a Research Study entitled

"The Experiences of African American Women District Middle Space Leaders in Alabama K-12 School Systems"

You are invited to participate in a research study to explore the experiences and navigation of district middle space leadership in Alabama's K-12 school systems from the perspective of African American Women. The study is being conducted by Tessie Williams, Doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Ellen Hahn, Professor, in the Auburn University Department of Educational, Leadership, and Technology and Dr. Elena Aydarova, Assistant Professor of Social Foundations, in the Auburn University Department of Educational, Leadership, and Technology. You were selected as a possible participant because you meet a three-fold criteria: 1. You identify as an African American Woman, 2. You are currently practicing or practiced as a district middle space leader in an Alabama K-12 school system, 3. You are credentialed with a Leadership Certificate as an Educational Administrator.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to take part in two forty-five minute online interview sessions. As an interview participant, you are asked to choose an interviewing space that is private and free from distractions. The interview questions from six themes (mentoring relationship, challenges, location, roles, tasks and passages) will explore your experiences as a district middle space leader as well as how you navigate the space as an African American Woman in middle space leadership in one of Alabama's K-12 school systems. In order to obtain a record of the interview for transcription purposes, the interview will be audio/video recorded. The audio/video recording will be deleted on or before December 18, 2022.

Version Date: March 18, 2021

Page 01 of 03

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Are there any risks or discomforts? Breach of confidentiality is a foreseen risk associated with participating in this research study. Personal information will be kept confidential. Information will be reported in an anonymous manner, and no identifiable information will be used.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? If you participate in this study, you can expect to benefit from sharing your experiences as an African American Woman district middle space leader in Alabama K-12 school systems. Your contribution will also add to literature regarding Black Feminist Thought and the experiences of African American Women. There are no tangible, direct benefits (money, gifts, gift cards etc.) offered or provided for your participation in this study.

Will you receive compensation for participating? There is no compensation offered or provided for participation in this study.

Are there any costs? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will not have any costs.

If you change your mind about participating, you may withdraw at any time during the study. Participation in this study is voluntary.

Any data obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. All personal information collected in this research study will remain confidential. To ensure loss of confidentiality (disclosing unauthorized information) does not occur in this study, there will be no identification tags attached to any participant of this study. Also, as a participant you must agree not share any information garnered in this study. Information obtained in this study as a result of your participation may be used for degree completion requirements, conference presentations, and or published in professional writings such as a books and journals.

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If you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact Tessie Williams at [REDACTED] or via email tzv0040@auburn.edu or Dr. Ellen Hahn at reamsch@auburn.edu or Dr. Elena Aydarova at eza0029@auburn.edu. A copy of this document will be emailed to you for your records.

Questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant may be addressed by contacting the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334) 844-5966 or email at IRBAdmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO. THIS LETTER IS YOURS TO KEEP.

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Print Name _____

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APPENDIX B

PHONE SCRIPT:

Hey there! It's Tessie Williams, from [REDACTED]. Yes, well, I am a Doctoral candidate at Auburn University in the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology. I am calling to invite you to participate in my research study. I am exploring the experiences and navigation of African American Women district middle space leadership in Alabama's K-12 school systems. In order to participate in this research study, you must meet a three-fold criteria: Identify as an African American Woman. Secondly, have completed certification requirements for P-12 Administration. Lastly, currently practicing or have formerly practiced in the position of district middle space leadership in one of Alabama's K-12 school systems. Do you meet these criteria?

Yes, response: Proceed with invitation.

No, response: Thank you for taking my call. I look forward to seeing you face to face or virtually at the next ALSDE meeting. Best wishes for the remainder of the school year.

Continuation of invitation:

Great! If you decide to participate in this study, you will take part in two forty-five minute online Zoom interview sessions. Also, you are asked to choose an interviewing space that is private and free from distractions. The interview questions from six themes (mentoring relationship, challenges, location, roles, tasks and passages) will explore your experiences as an African American Woman district middle space leader as well as how you navigate the space. There are no tangible, direct benefits (money, gifts, gift cards etc.) offered or provided for your participation in this study. Additionally, to ensure loss of confidentiality (disclosing unauthorized information) does not occur in this study, there will be no identification tags attached to you as a participant in this study. Moreover, you, as a participant you must agree not share any information garnered in this study. Are you willing to participate?

Yes, response: Proceed with invitation.

No, response: Thank you for taking my call. I look forward to seeing you face to face or virtually at the next ALSDE meeting. Best wishes for the remainder of the school year.

Continuation of invitation:

Wonderful! Please share your email with me. I will provide an Information Letter detailing the research study and confirming your participation. To give you ample time to read the Information Letter and consider questions you may have for me, I will follow up with a phone call no later than a week from today. At that time, I will answer questions and schedule interview dates and times. If questions should arise prior to my follow up call, please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED] or tzw0040@auburn.edu or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Hahn, at reamseh@auburn.edu or my co-advisor, Dr. Aydarova, at eza0029@auburn.edu.

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E-MAIL Follow Up:

It was great to talk with you! Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research to explore the experiences and navigation of district middle space leadership in Alabama's K-12 school systems from the perspective of African American Women. Attached you will find the Information Letter detailing the study. As I mentioned in our conversation, to give you ample time to read the Information Letter and consider questions you may have for me, I will follow up with a phone call no later than a week from today. If questions should arise prior to my follow up call, free to contact me at [REDACTED] or tzw0040@auburn.edu or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Hahn, at reamsch@auburn.edu or my co-advisor, Dr. Aydarova, at eza0029@auburn.edu. I look forward to speaking you soon.

Sincerely,

Tessie Williams

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APPENDIX C

Data Collection Instruments:

1. Laptop computer (password-protected) to transcribe video interviews.
2. Zoom online conferencing account to record participant interviews.

Research Questions:

This qualitative study addressed two questions that were grounded in Black Feminist Thought:

1. How do African American Women experience district middle space leadership in K-12 school systems of Alabama?
2. How do African American Women navigate district middle space leadership in K-12 schools systems of Alabama?

Interview Protocol

African American Women District Middle Space Leader

Passage

1. Please share with me how you chose education as a career. Feel free to include the length of time you have been a middle space leader as well as experiences from your childhood, family dynamics, K-12 education, college, church affiliation, sororities, jobs, volunteer experiences etc.
2. Often times, there are characteristics and or behaviors which we acquire from members of our family as well as those with close relationship. These traits and or behaviors, in some cases prepare us for certain positions. Talk with me about specific characteristics and or behaviors you have found useful as an African American woman middle space leader.
3. In thinking of characteristics or behaviors of your family as well as those with close relationship, is there one person who ultimately influenced your life most of all? If so, please tell me about the person and how he or she aided your passage to middle space leadership.
4. As a district middle space leader, describe experiences in the journey which you would note as unique to your gender and or ethnicity.
5. If given the opportunity to provide "words of wisdom" to other African American women regarding your passage to the district office and how to successfully navigate the journey, what would you tell her?

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Challenges

1. Being a K-12 district leader has peaks and valleys, walk me through any challenges you may have experienced as a district middle space leader.
2. Of the challenging experiences you have shared, tell me about an awe-inspiring event which occurred as a result of your challenge(s).
3. District leaders are positioned to make multiple decisions throughout each day. Share with me your strategy when challenged with a critical decision.
4. Have you experienced challenges as a middle space leader that were unique to your ethnicity and/or gender? If so, please elaborate.
5. If given the opportunity to provide "words of wisdom" to other African American women regarding possible challenges as a middle space leader, what would you tell her?

Location

1. There are work experiences which directly correlate to the location and/or space. Share with me memorable experiences you may have encountered specific to being a middle space leader.
2. As you settle into being located directly below the superintendent and/or the superintendent's designee; yet, above school level administrators, there is a sense of twist and between. Please share with me if and/or when you have experienced a tug between the superintendent and school level administrators.
3. In researching middle space leadership, I have seen multiple representations of organizational structure. Tell me about the organizational structure of your school system, please include the vertical and horizontal structure as it relates to your position.
4. Would you describe your location in the organizational structure unique due to your gender and/or ethnicity? Please share more about your response.
5. If given the opportunity to provide "words of wisdom" to other African American women regarding being at the district office and how to successfully navigate the space/location, what would you tell her?

Tasks

1. The umbrella of responsibilities for veteran middle space leaders is usually quite expansive, please share with me tasks which fall under your scope of responsibility.
2. Of tasks previously described which are most significant to improving teacher effectiveness as well as student achievement?

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3. As a district level administrator, having a regime to complete task is extremely important. Share with me some of the processes have you established to complete assigned duties and or requirements promptly. Also, how have these processes changed throughout your tenure as a middle space leader?
4. How would you describe the type of tasks you are assigned? For example: clerical, in depth planning, logistical, etc. Please expound on your response.
5. Do you perceive assigned tasks to be delegated to you due to your gender and or ethnicity? Please elaborate on your response.
6. If given the opportunity to provide "words of wisdom" to other African American women regarding the range of tasks at the district office and how to successfully navigate the workflow of tasks, what would you tell her?

Roles

1. Titles and or roles in K-12 systems across districts may vary. Share with me title changes you may have experienced during your tenure as a middle space leader. Also, please tell me your official title in the district?
2. In this role do you supervise any employees? Please list the titles of employees to whom you supervise and describe your overall experience in this role.
3. In most K-12 organizational charts, the direct supervisor for a middle space leader is typically the Superintendent. Is this the case for you? If not, please provide the title of your direct supervisor. Also, what is the gender and ethnicity of your direct supervisor?
4. Share one adjective which describes you as a district middle space leader who is an African American woman. How does this adjective describe you?
5. Are there roles in which you have assumed primarily due to your gender and ethnicity? Please elaborate on your response.
6. Please offer "Words of Wisdom" to other African American women regarding the fluidity of roles and or titles as you perceive them at the district level.

Mentoring Relationships

1. As a veteran middle space leader, have you been officially assigned a mentor within the district? If so, please share with me the title, gender and ethnicity of your mentor. Also, please describe your overall experience of being a mentee.
2. Do you have an unofficial mentor within the district? If so, please share with me the title, gender and ethnicity of your mentor. Please share with me how this unofficial mentoring relationship was formed.

3. Also, have you established a mentoring relationship with someone outside of the district? If so, please tell me how this relationship was developed as well as the gender and ethnicity of your 'out of district' mentor.
4. Talk with me about official and or unofficial organizations you have joined which encourage networking and or social supports for you as a veteran middle space leader (specifically, as an African American woman).
5. Are there parts of your role as mentor unique due to your gender and or ethnicity? Please tell me about those components.
6. "Words of wisdom" to other African American woman in district middle space leadership regarding developing, and or maintaining a mentor-mentee relationship at the district level.
7. Thank you for sharing these experiences with me. As we end this interview, is there a book, piece of literature, a podcast, TedTalk, recorded webinar or any resource you would suggest to other district middle space leaders (specifically an African American woman)?