

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

RANESA'S JOURNEY - FROM ADVERSITY TO EMPOWERMENT AS AN AFRICAN  
AMERICAN WOMAN IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A REFLECTIVE SELF-STUDY

By

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Doctor of  
Education in Assessment, Learning, and School Improvement

Middle Tennessee State University  
December 2024

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” - Philippians 4:13

Thank you, Jesus! It was only by His grace and mercy that I was able to complete this part of my journey and reach this significant milestone in my life. To my loving best friend and partner in everything, my husband, your support in every endeavor has been my greatest source of comfort and encouragement. You have been my rock, always believing in me during my most difficult challenges. Your sacrifices and understanding during countless late nights and weekends spent studying and researching have not gone unnoticed. Thank you for being both my guiding light and a source of strength - modeling unwavering faith in my abilities. You've cheered me on through every obstacle. I could not have accomplished this without you by my side.

To my magnificent, intelligent, knowledgeable, and fearless daughters, you are my inspiration, joy, purpose, and meaning in life. Thank you for displaying patience during the times when I was buried in books or consumed by deadlines. Your words of encouragement have taught me the true meaning of resilience and dedication. I hope this accomplishment inspires you both to chase dreams with passion, confidently walk in your truth, and challenge the status quo! Remember, it's okay to start over and create your own rules!

Lastly, I want to take a moment to thank myself! This adventure has embodied the power of “Yes, I can”! I acknowledge the sacrifices I made, the obstacles I overcame in the relentless pursuit of my goals. I am proud of what I have accomplished and grateful for my resilience. This dissertation is not only a reflection of my commitment to education, leadership, and professional development but also a testament to the love, support, and encouragement to my family and faith. I am forever grateful for each of you. The wind beneath my wings is liberating now that I accepted my destiny!



## ABSTRACT

My dissertation, "*A Journey: From Adversity to Empowerment in Education as an African American Woman in Educational Leadership: A Reflective Self-Study*," reflects my personal and professional experiences as an African American woman in educational leadership. Through a self-study approach, I explore the challenges I've faced, particularly in navigating non-inclusive work environments and confronting the stereotypes often applied to African American women, such as the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel archetypes. This research also delves into the psychological and physical impacts of racial battle fatigue and microaggressions, and how these experiences have shaped my understanding of myself and my role as a leader.

The purpose of this study is to reflect on my journey and empower other African American women in leadership by sharing strategies for overcoming systemic barriers, fostering inclusion, and building strong systems of support. By critically examining both my personal experiences and the shared experiences of my Critical Friends Group, I aim to contribute to the broader conversation regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational institutions. Through this work, I hope to offer insight into the resilience and tools that African American women can develop to thrive in environments that have historically excluded them. My goal is to shine a light on the importance of allyship, self-reflection, and mental strategies for success, while advocating for a shift toward more inclusive and supportive professional environments. Ultimately, this dissertation is my contribution to the ongoing efforts to create educational institutions where diversity is celebrated and where African American women can lead with confidence and authenticity.

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## LIST OF TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Archetypes of African American women	Symbolic embodiments of black womanhood, through historical narratives, cultural representations, and contemporary discourse (Geyton et al., 2022)
Culture	The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time
Cultural Identity	Knowing yourself because of a collection of struggles, oppression, untraditional successes, beauty, and creativity explored through walking in rhythm while understanding the unsaid
Critical Friend Group	A safe space for educators to discuss the status of their work and outcomes, challenge assumptions, and building trusting relationships relevant to their lived experiences (Blake & Gibson, 2021)
Identity	The distinguishing character or personality of an individual; also described as closely aligned with support systems formed with other black leaders facing the same challenges and/or who have overcome the challenges seeking to provide guidance, validation, and confirmation
Microaggression	A comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group; brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults
Microinsults	Verbal or non-verbal attacks via name-calling or avoidant behavior
Microinvalidations	The everyday words or deeds that communicate to targets of microaggressions the invalidation of: their experiential reality, value as a person, affirmation of their racial or group identity, support and encouragement, and reassurance that they are not alone

Microinterventions	Everyday actions aimed at making microaggressions visible, disarming them, educating the perpetrator, and seeking external support
Racial Battle Fatigue	Psychological exhaustion experienced by individuals from racially marginalized groups
The Shield	The shield visually illustrates challenges such as microaggressions, racial battle fatigue, archetypes of African American women, and the psychological impact of navigating biased systems while balancing professional expectations and cultural identity.
S.W.A.G. Analysis	A reflective tool designed to promote self-examination and personal development by evaluating one's Strengths, Weaknesses, Analyzing areas of improvement, and recognizing Gains

*“The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black Woman.”*  
-Malcolm X.

## **Chapter 1**

As an African American woman in educational leadership, I begin this dissertation by reflecting on my own experiences. This chapter describes my experiences as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal considering the issues of cultural identity, archetypes of African American women, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue, as well as the more subtle but profound impediments that have influenced my professional trajectory. These difficulties have shaped my development as a person and as a leader. Here, I present the themes and issues of inclusiveness, culture and identity, all of which are filtered according to my personal experiences. The objective is to understand how I have identified and internalized my experiences as a leader. The remainder of this section provides context for examining how African American women, such as myself, react to, internalize, and eventually overcome bias in institutions that aren't always designed for African American women.

### **Context: My Path to Self-Awareness**

During the writing of this dissertation, it was essential to explore the motivations, background, and experiences that have intricately shaped my decision to pursue this self-study. This self-study held profound significance as it allowed me to self-reflect and engage in a personal understanding of my experiences and empowered me to achieve my professional goals. As a doctoral student at Middle Tennessee State University in the Assessment, Learning, and Student Success: School Improvement program of the College of Education, I embraced the value of self-study in advancing my knowledge. However, this journey was not simply an

academic one, but also a deeply personal one. Through this self-study, my goal was to empower African American women in leadership roles to seek allyship, foster strong systems of support, and utilize the mental tools that have helped me to understand a variety of concepts to deepen my understanding of non-inclusive work environments.

### **Definitions of Self-Study**

Samaras and Freese (2006) defined self-study as “a component of reflection in which teachers are asked to systematically and critically examine their actions and the context of those actions as a way of developing a more consciously driven mode of professional activity” (p. 24). Samaras and Freese (2006) identified the three components of self-study as personal growth and development, professional growth and development, and continuous educational improvement. In addition to aligning with my research questions, these self-study components explained why this methodology is relevant. Through self-study, I questioned how I would use the research to grow as a leader, educate others, and advance professionally. By researching best practices and learning from previous experiences, I was determined to internalize these new insights to maximize my impact in both personal and professional arenas.

This self-study was pivotal in fostering personal development, enhancing professional growth, and contributing to my continuous educational improvement. My experiences provided me with advanced knowledge, critical thinking skills, and innovative strategies essential for lifelong learning and career advancement. Through the self-study methodology, I examined my experiences with both inclusiveness and the lack thereof as an African American woman in educational institutions. This approach offered valuable insights into our practices by engaging in reflective inquiry and prompting critical questions such as, “How can I improve what I am doing?” (Samaras & Freese, 2006).

## **Problem and Purpose of Study**

Problems that I have experienced as an African American woman in educational institutions were isolation, bias, racism, sexism, and limited cultural perspectives. As an African American woman, there have been few educational work environments in which I have experienced inclusive working conditions. The purpose of this study is to reflect on my journey and empower other African American women in leadership by sharing strategies for overcoming systemic barriers, fostering inclusion, and building strong systems of support

In this self-study, I explored my journey as an African American woman in a leadership role, highlighted ways in which I navigated both inclusive and non-inclusive environments in the workplace and reflected upon the resilience and strategies that fueled my success despite the challenges. This research has forced me to reflect upon multi-layered questions surrounding the problem and explore several topics, such as the significance of inclusion and the ways workplaces have unintentionally excluded co-workers. My initial research questions were:

- What is the impact of exclusion on the working relationship between employees?
- Has the lack of inclusion driven educators to seek employment elsewhere?
- What challenges make other districts and/or career fields appealing to African American women when seeking inclusion?

However, through additional research, my research questions morphed into a single question: “How do I experience and respond to racial bias in the workplace?” The study examines improving cultural understanding and awareness to support inclusion in a diverse workplace. The focus of this study will also shed light on the significance and effects of a non-inclusive and diversified school culture or educational institution. I define, identify, and

describe personal meanings of culture and identity, archetypes of African American Women, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue (RBF) to develop a shared understanding of why inclusion and diversity are relevant in the educational arena.

### **Research Question**

This self-study required the reflection of a variety of personal experiences and shared experiences of my Critical Friends Group (CFG) in order to have a deeper understanding of our work environments. With this purpose, my research question is: How do I experience and respond racial bias in the workplace? I utilized the self-study methodology to explore and answer the question of how my experiences with diverse, inclusive, and non-inclusive educational workplaces have shaped my understanding and approach to different situations.

### **Personal Inquiry into Self-Study**

As a result of the connection between my professional and personal journeys, I have developed a story of resilience. As I share stories of resilience, challenges, and triumphs, I will recall stories from my personal and professional experiences that have shaped my belief systems, culture, and identity. In this dissertation, I will use italics to highlight my experiences as I tell stories from my past to convey my voice to the reader and aid the audience in clearly understanding my perspective. My stories are meant to connect my experiences to the methodology and framework.

A familiar recollection began when I decided to attend Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, a Historically Black College University (HBCU) in Huntsville, Alabama. *For the first time, I was surrounded by leadership and teachers who looked like I did, understood my cultural upbringing, and lived in my community. Once in my educational career, I felt part of*

*a larger piece of the pie, included and heard! I lived in a city of harmony in what one would call a melting pot.*

*While moving back to Tennessee after graduating college, I began to think about old feelings and questions. Upon returning to Tennessee, I prayed and hoped that people with limited mindsets – including racist leanings and discriminatory practices - had changed, but I quickly realized nothing had. I still held out hope for change and forward-thinking even though racism was alive and well within the town.*

*I remember an incident while I was in elementary school that took the school and community by storm. I was in the fifth grade and walking to the gym. I witnessed a group of teachers in a huddle whispering about the new gym teacher. Some teachers looked stunned and overwhelmed; some appeared fearful and shocked. When I arrived home later that evening, my mom asked, as she always did, “What did you do at school today?” I answered, “Mr. Batman is my new P.E. teacher.” Out of pure excitement and joy, my mother replied, “THEY HIRED A BLACK TEACHER.” At this moment, I quickly realized why my teachers were in a huddle in the hallway on my way to gym class. As I continued schooling, I recognized that none of my teachers reflected my race. None of my teachers at the time could identify with my cultural upbringing. I never saw my teachers in local grocery stores, beauty salons, or churches. Some years passed, and before I knew it, it was my senior year in high school. The thoughts in my head only grew louder and louder, asking why I never had a teacher who looked like me.*

*I can recall when I began my career in education, I realized there were potential issues. I will never forget my first teaching job. I encountered some White parents who did not want me teaching their children and some co-workers who had never interacted with an African American teacher. While teaching 1<sup>st</sup> grade and preparing for Meet the Teacher Night, I spent hundreds of*

dollars out of my pocket to ensure my classroom was perfect for my students and parents. I intended to create a kid-friendly environment that was fun and reflected an atmosphere for learning. As the night began, one last piece remained as I completed the finishing touches: I needed to place my class list outside my door. From the previous year, many of the kindergarteners knew me. They knew that we had a “good time” in my classroom every day. Whether we were eating Gummy Bears while completing math graphs, celebrating someone’s birthday, or having a dance party for no apparent reason, we had fun and celebrated being six years old. I was always aware of my demeanor and approach as I knew some children had never been exposed to African American people. As families made their way up the hallway, many children were ecstatic when they found out that I was going to be their teacher for the new school year, and so were the parents! However, there was one family that approached my classroom with a look of disgust on their face. From there, I already knew what my year was going to entail. According to their six-year-old child, I yelled at her and only her every day in class. Because of this, she hated coming to school. Never once did the parents request a parent meeting or speak with me about the alleged yelling. The student was automatically correct, and I was automatically guilty. A few weeks passed, and to my knowledge, everything was fine until it was not!

One afternoon, while loading up my car and preparing to leave, I noticed a vehicle backed in directly across from me. I did not pay any attention to this vehicle as I got into my car to drive away. However, I did notice in my rear-view mirror that this exact car from the parking lot was now making all the same turns as me. I quickly began to make lane changes to confirm my thoughts that I WAS BEING FOLLOWED by this White man! I realized who it was. It was this student’s father from my class! This student's father was trying to follow me home! I

*remained calm and called my husband to let him know what was happening. However, I could not confirm his intention, nor did I want to. I could not imagine what he was thinking. Was he going to harm me based on what his child said? Why did he think this behavior or intimidation strategy was going to work? To make a long story short, the student was removed from my classroom, the father was banned from school property for one year, and the mother was allowed to join PTO as the Vice President, where she came to school every day! For the remainder of the school year, the School Resource Officer (SRO) walked me to my car every day!*

*There were times when I was the only African American in the building. And once I became a part of school leadership, African American educators held less than five percent of the leadership positions.*

Jason Grissom (2018), Vanderbilt University associate professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt's Peabody College of Education and Human Development, highlighted, "Turnover among Black teachers is especially high when they are racially isolated. Black teachers turn over at higher rates when they have few Black teachers as colleagues" (Report: Racial Isolation Affects TN Black Teachers' Turnover Rates, 2018).

*This family's hostile undertones and unfounded complaints were deemed more valuable and credible than my perspective and affectively silenced me.*

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail" Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people" (1963). My interpretation of this quote implies that we will need to seek forgiveness for not speaking out against injustices. With this study, I chose to repent by rejecting silence about my educational experiences. To contextualize my experiences within the literature, I will focus on four significant areas:

- culture and identity
- Racial Battle Fatigue
- the Three M's of Microaggression
- the archetypes of African American women

This analysis will be expanded upon and connected to my conceptual framework in Chapter Two.

### **Overview and Significance of the Dissertation**

This self-study will examine my own experiences with culture and identity, racial bias, and archetypes of African American women in the workplace. It will involve reflection and analysis of my own experiences, as well as an exploration of the literature on racial bias and microaggressions in the workplace. The importance of this self-study lies in the recognition that racial bias and microaggressions can have significant impacts on individuals in the workplace. By examining my own experiences, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how these experiences have impacted me both personally and professionally. Additionally, this self-study will allow me to identify strategies for addressing racial bias and microaggressions in educational institutions and to become a more effective ally and advocate for other African American women who may be facing similar experiences.

Providing an overview and introduction to the subject matter surrounding inclusion and diversity in education institutions, the first chapter of this self-study explains why the subject matter surrounding these topics is relevant to the educational environment. Chapter Two explores culture and identity, workplace, and personal culture to support the research question. Furthermore, in Chapter Two, literature studies are utilized and reviewed to make concrete arguments for why educational institutions should be aware of this information and the

importance of African American women in these types of work environments. In Chapter Three, I discuss the methodology of self-study, share stories that have contributed to the formation of my cultural identity, and describe the experiences that have contributed to my cultural identity. In Chapter Four, self-discovery is explained through Strengths, Weaknesses, Analysis, and Gains (S.W.A.G.). This chapter highlights newly found observations derived from self-confidence, mental strength, and personal successes.

The goal is to provide strategies to help myself and other African American women in the field of education and leadership overcome discriminatory acts and behaviors in educational institutions to aid in our perseverance, as well as to provide interventions to assist others in doing the same.

From segregated classrooms to overachieving in the boardroom, between 2020 and 2021, African American women made up 13% of associate degrees, 12% of bachelor's degrees, 15% of master's degrees, and 12% of doctoral, medical, and dental degrees (NCES, 2023). African American women are a highly educated group. However, a research study conducted in 2019-2020 found that only 11% of teachers were African American, but 24% of the student population is comprised of African Americans (Hart, 2022). It is apparent that even though African American women hold advanced degrees, they continue to be underrepresented as leaders in educational institutions. Not having a certified teacher in the classroom is a problem in Tennessee, but the lack of African American teachers is an ongoing issue for school districts nationwide (Hart, 2022). These startling facts lead me to the question: If African American women are highly degreed, why are African American women underrepresented as educational institution leaders? Additionally, during the research, I highlight the ways underrepresentation

impacted me as a student and as a leader. Furthermore, I highlight the impact and significance of African American women in educational institutions.

### **Defining and Applying Self-Study**

With the birth of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), some non-marginalized leaders are beginning to question their practices. DEI has gained notoriety based on the research of many institutions. The concept of diversity in the workplace has gained attention as a result of research conducted by various institutions (“More Than 80% of Organizations,” 2021), yet non-diversified leaders have questioned outdated hiring practices and many other ideas that affect African American women in leadership roles. Efforts are being made to reexamine outdated hiring practices and other thought processes to achieve an appropriate reflection of the communities in which we live. Now, the questions become: why diversity, equity, and inclusion matter, and how do they impact me as an African American woman.

### **Why Does It Matter?**

In 2021, Cheryl D. Orr and Marcia L. Conner, shared in their article "The Path to Equity for Black Women in the Public Sector," that "employees of color, but especially women of color, continue to face obstacles to opportunities for advancement in the public sector" (p.3).

*Through my lived experiences, I know the disparity in educational institutions cannot be eliminated by a simple program or a new policy as the root of these disparities lies deeper. Some of the disparities I have faced were: the lack of African American women mentorships and African American women leadership roles, and the everyday racism and bias African American women face in educational institutions.*

*In addition to changing beliefs and eliminating disparities when entering educational institutions as an African American woman, I sought a sense of belonging while navigating*

*uncharted territories in non-inclusive institutions. Finding belonging and belonging cues in educational institutions were important to me. Although I could easily identify belonging cues as an African American woman, I could also identify when I did not belong within the educational institutions. When attempting to belong to work groups or an educational institution, I often dealt with frustration because people who were part of the dominant culture would turn a blind eye or choose not to speak out about the injustices they witnessed.*

According to Daniel Coyle (2019) in his book *Culture code: The secrets of highly successful groups*, a sense of belonging is easy to destroy and hard to build. Coyle explains three characteristics of belonging:

1. Energy: The amount of energy applied to the situation, the environment, and its potential outcome. It is essential to evaluate the potential effectiveness of an action before providing positive or negative input.
2. Individualization: Customizing the experience for the person or people involved to have an exclusive experience, intentionally creating an environment promoting growth and value.
3. Future orientation: Fostering relationships that will thrive and grow for future experiences and relationships. (p. 11)

Cues such as these stress to others, “You are safe here” (Coyle, 2019). A team environment where everyone is psychologically welcomed and made to feel safe is crucial for success. *This resonates with my experience because when I would share specific stories with members of leadership who had the power to change systems, a conversation about diversity was not met with care or a forward-thinking mindset.*

## Removing and Acknowledging Barriers

*For me, breaking racial barriers was a challenge because I was the minority and my colleagues did not view me as a peer nor were they motivated to remove the barriers I faced.* Author Elizabeth Leiba in her book, *I'm not yelling: A Black woman's guide to navigating the workplace (2022)*, described her experience while in a viral meeting where disrespect and manipulation became apparent. *It was easy for me to relate to this story since, often in these spaces, I was one of only a few African American women in a building dominated by Caucasian women.*

Leiba (2022) relayed an incident in which she was part of a work meeting where she was undermined and belittled by subordinates.

The organization that bought us was relying on many of us on the leadership team to offer insights so they could determine a strategy to create the much-needed synergy to drive the new institution forward. As such, my insight, as someone who has worked in the corporate office for six years, was often called on in those initial strategy meetings. But what I kept finding was that my insights would be challenged by some of the more junior members of the transition team, who all happened to be white men and women. They would challenge points I brought up for consideration and even outright rejected the answers to questions they had just asked me in our team Zoom meetings. .... My frustration with the lack of empathy was at a boiling point. (p. 151)

African American women face systemic biases and obstacles in the workplace that must be acknowledged and addressed. This acknowledgment begins with me.

Thus, this study highlights my sense of belonging, or lack of belonging, as I explore cues and signals received as well as the barriers I faced as an African American leader in education. I strive to understand my experiences with systemic bias as a leader and to create a more equitable environment where the contributions of African American women are valued and respected. I explore the following question in this study: In what ways do I identify, internalize, and respond to racial bias in the workspace? In sharing my story, I hope to comfort and encourage other

African American women facing similar challenges by demonstrating that they can overcome not belonging and negative spaces.

### **Engaging in Independent Research**

As I delved into the research, I focused on exploring the literature related to culture and identity, racial battle fatigue, the archetypes of African American women and the 3 M's of microaggression. While exploring literature related to culture and identity, Gaetane Jean-Maris' (2013) explained that some African American women principals and professionals occasionally struggle with pressures associated with their culture and identity within their communities and in the workplace. For that reason, African American women principals and professionals frequently face scrutiny of their education, qualifications, and knowledge.

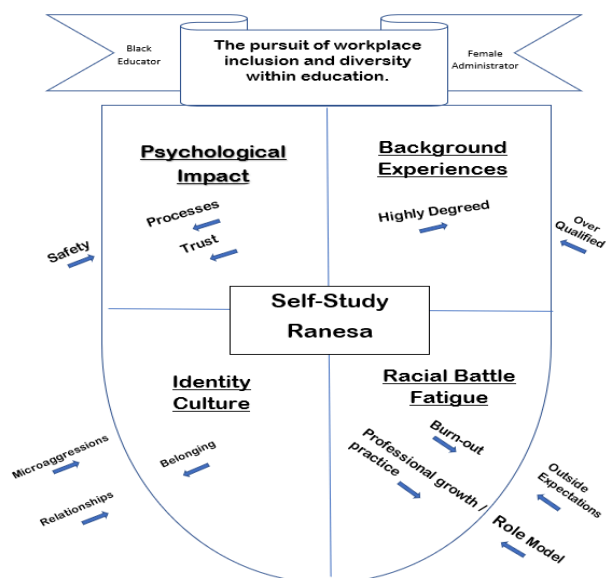
Unique obstacles and challenges such as gender, race, and age are yet another set of barriers African American women principals and professionals face in educational institutions. *As an African American woman, I identified with these barriers while having to exceed expectations and everyday work requirements. My culture and identity were barriers, yet I still had to deal with microaggressions and the mental and physical effects of racial battle fatigue.* As a result of microaggressions and depletion due to racial battle fatigue, African American women are less able to embrace their true identities through their lived cultural experiences, which have a profound impact on their educational and work experiences.

My research strongly supports and aligns with the self-study conceptual framework by drawing on culture and identity, racial battle fatigue, archetypes of African American women, and the three M's of microaggressions. In Figure 1, I am showcasing a symbolic shield that represents the connections I make between the elements of the literature I have studied and my personal experiences as an African American leader. The shield serves as a visual representation

of how the themes, ideas, and insights from the literature intersect with and inform my role and identity as a leader within the African American community. The shield is split into four quadrants, each representing the ways in which I had to be prepared for each day.

Overall, this self-study is an essential step in my own personal and professional development, as well as in the broader efforts to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational institutions. This self-study is vital in the context of wider discussions around diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. By examining my own experiences, I hope to contribute to these discussions and raise awareness of how racial bias and microaggression can impact individuals in educational institutions.

Figure 1

*The Weight of the Shield 1*

As I explored the literature, my conceptual framework continued to develop. The shield in Figure 1

represented “my truth” as conceptualized through the literature from the systematic burden I carried as an adolescent and as an African American woman in a leadership role. The heaviness of belonging—relationships, acceptance, perception, and code-switching—was too much for anyone to carry, especially for me as an African American woman in a leadership role.

Acknowledging and embracing the diverse identities and cultures of school leaders, executives, individual contributors, and adult learners is essential for fostering an equitable learning environment where individuals feel valued, supported, and empowered. It is important to note that the objective of this study is to examine the significant effects of non-inclusive educational learning environments as well as define, identify, and describe personal meanings of

cultural microaggressions so that we can develop a shared understanding of cultural misunderstandings or microaggressions that some educators, administrators, and other African American women have encountered in the workplace.

### **Cultural Identity**

Preserving and celebrating my African American culture contributes to my identity. It is an essential part of who I am and brings me a sense of connection and belonging to my community and ancestors. Probing questions surrounding identity begin with:

- Who are you?
- How would you describe yourself in your authentic state?
- Are you free and safe enough to bring this version of yourself to the institution you serve?
- What does it mean to be African American in America?

American culture and identity play a vital role in combating stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Our cultural heritage is crucial for African American women in leadership roles while being load-bearing walls in our communities to maintain our culture and identity. Through examining these questions, I begin to establish how culture has had a sufficient impact on my identity as an African American leader. African American women's identities vary depending on the environment in which they interact.

*As a result of these factors, I often find the concept of my culture and identity complex. As an African American woman, I can be identified by my physical characteristics. It is also possible to identify me as an African American Woman with a high level of education. Regarding my professional identity, I describe myself as well-educated, confident, tenacious, and compassionate. Nevertheless, my peers describe me as outspoken, feisty, humorous, self-made,*

*brave, and ambitious. The problem occurs when I enter into non-inclusive environments; I am only viewed as a black lady. My identity is more extensive than the color of my skin.*

Identity is closely aligned with support systems formed with other African American leaders facing similar challenges - who have overcome significant challenges and sought to provide guidance, validation, and confirmation (Denton, 1990). *Throughout my identity, I acknowledge my ancestors and trace my heritage back seven generations. As someone who has grown up seven generations removed from slavery, identity plays an essential role in my life.*

Celebrating educational milestones celebrates the lives and dreams that were prematurely ended due to the inability to attend public schools or achieve higher education. Several of the barriers were filled with strife, violence, and rejection because of the person's race.

*My culture has provided me with the blueprint for navigating biases and maneuvering barriers that once hindered my kinship, such as attending desegregated schools, participating in sporting events, and patronizing businesses that were only exclusive to non-people of color. These events have profoundly impacted my birth of culture. It led me to create a personal definition of culture. I define African American culture as a collection of struggles, oppression, beauty, and creativity explored through walking in rhythm while understanding the unsaid.*

*The outside world can also have a blind mindset regarding understanding my culture and what I believe to be true. My culture and identity provide a source of empowerment and pride. When culture and identity merge, they serve as a platform for self-expression, creativity, and community-building. Being successful, self-aware, and feeling like I belong while promoting mental and emotional health and well-being are essential. I highlight my achievements, marveling over the discrimination I have faced and how I had to overcome its contributions to*

*the resilience of African American women.* Our experiences challenge misconceptions and promote a more accurate understanding of our perspectives. My culture and identity encompass a rich tradition that has evolved over centuries. As a result of these connections, it is also intended to examine the significance and effects of a non-inclusive, diversified educational culture and identify and describe personal interpretations of culture, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue.

### **Archetypes of African American Women**

The purpose of this section is to investigate the nuanced complexity and diverse manifestations of African American women's identity that shape this multifaceted construct. Throughout this section, we explore the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel archetypes, which are symbolic embodiments of African American womanhood, through historical narratives, cultural representations, and contemporary discourse. For some African American women, stressors in the workplace have caused health conditions. High blood pressure, depression, obesity, and other chronic diseases were identified as health-related issues (Woods-Giscmbé, 2010). Research surrounding how African American women deal with stress has not been fully realized and studied. The effects of stress, health conditions, racial battle fatigue, and microaggressions on African American women have been listed as adversities African American women face in the workplace and educational institutions.

*I have been seen as having two strikes against me since I was born because of the harsh realities of being a woman and an African American. As a job applicant and decision-maker, these types of barriers have always influenced my decision-making process.*

*I remember when I received my first real job. I was overjoyed because everything that the textbook predicted started to line up! I graduated from college. I had married my college love,*

*and now we wanted to add to our family. When working for this well-known company, you either worked inside the factory or you worked inside the building. I was lucky enough to work inside the building, where the offices were located. Inside the building, there were only four African Americans working there. At that time, we were considered “lucky!”*

*Later, my husband and I received the news that I was pregnant. I learned of the news very early and was excited to share the news with family friends, and even co-workers! This is when I quickly realized everyone is not happy for you. My supervisor's attitude quickly changed and not in a positive manner when I announced my pregnancy at work. Her dislike for me became evident every day, and treatment was unbearable at times. The only good days I had were when she scheduled time off or was sick. Due to the strain and stress my supervisor foisted upon me during my pregnancy, I developed high blood pressure and gave birth a month early. While in the hospital, she sent another co-worker to the hospital and had them deliver my FMLA forms to be signed and returned to her less than four hours after giving birth. When I returned to work, while standing in my cubicle one day with tears in my eyes, I asked the Lord, “What’s my purpose in life?” And like the speed of lighting, I heard the Lord say, “You’re supposed to teach.” From that moment on, I started the process to obtain a Master’s degree in Early Childhood Education. Although this first job taught me a lot about defensive strategies, I was happy to have a plan to move on to better things.*

In institutions where African American women are supposed to be strong, stories such as these are a harsh reality for me and many others. My pregnancy was significantly affected by the stressors of this job - as I learned years later while reading the article, *Superwoman Schema: African American Women's Views Stress, Strength, and Health* (Woods-Giscmbe, 2010). As a result of this article, I became familiar with a term and explanation I did not know. The article

revealed African American women's archetypes: Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel (Woods-Giscmbé, 2010). By critically examining these narratives and questioning their underlying implications in educational institutions, it is my goal to initiate the process of untangling the intricate network of culture and identity, microaggression, and racial battle fatigue.

### **Racial Battle Fatigue**

Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) refers to psychological exhaustion experienced by individuals from racially marginalized groups (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). RBF has psychosocial and emotional impacts on people of color: (a) anxiety, (b) frustration, (c) anger and anger-suppression, (d) helplessness, (e) hopelessness, and (f) depression. These and other impacts can lead to physiological effects, including (a) loss of or increase in appetite, (b) extreme fatigue, (c) hypertension, (d) sleeplessness, and other effects due to the chronic stress of confronting systematic inequities (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). This state of perpetual strain can be reflected in emotional distress, physical health issues, decreased motivation, and academic underachievements, posing significant obstacles to leading and fighting for change. Racial battle fatigue can also be defined as the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses due to the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions (Franklin, n.d., p. 46). The experience of navigating racism within educational institutes can result in a phenomenon described as racial battle fatigue. By exploring microaggressions next, this work will illuminate how racial battle fatigue may develop through daily experience. Those experiences and the lack of essential tools such as micro-interventions, mentorships, and advocates available to novice educators or leaders can inspire them to seek the allyship of others on their educational journey and in their careers

(Sue et al., 2019). The experience of navigating racism, discrimination, and microaggressions within educational institutes can result in this phenomenon.

### **The Three M's of Microaggressions**

Microaggressions are defined as the “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which lie beneath visibility or consciousness and which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults” (Cyr et al., 2021). Throughout this research, analyzing how people of color have experienced microaggression while in an educational institution or work environment is vital for providing ways to support themselves and others with micro-interventions.

The first M of the 3 M's of microaggressions is microinsults. Microinsults convey rudeness by demeaning a heritage or identity (Cyr et al., 2021). For example, African American women style their natural hair in different styles. Some African American women wear their hair in protected styles such as braids or sister locs, while others choose to wear hair extension, wigs, and natural styles that do not require harmful chemical processing. The CROWN Act (*Tennessee General Assembly Legislation*, n.d.) was created and passed to protect African American women from discrimination in the workplace based upon the ways they choose to wear their hair.

Microassaults is the second M of the 3 M's of Microaggression. Microassaults are verbal or non-verbal attacks via name-calling or avoidant behavior (Cyr et al., 2021). Jim Crow Laws are an example of microassaults because these acts and laws were geared towards African American men and women.

Microinvalidations are the third M of the 3 M's of Microaggression. Microinvalidations negate the experiences, realities, or feelings of a person of color (Cyr et al., 2021). Microinvalidations are defined as the everyday words or deeds, whether intentional or

unintentional, that communicate to targets microaggressions invalidation of their (a) experiential reality, (b) value as a person, (c) affirmation of their racial or group identity, (d) support and encouragement, and (e) reassurance that they are not alone (Sue et al., 2019).

These everyday racist events also occur at the macro level, where societal or political climate impacts the frequency of the micro or everyday aggressions (Sue et al., 2019). These seemingly harmless remarks, gestures, or actions can significantly impact the targeted individuals and perpetuate system inequalities. The term microaggression has gained recognition as a pervasive phenomenon that affects various marginalized groups. There are many microaggressions that African Americans experience every day, ranging from feeling disapproval, isolation, and alienation to lacking self-confidence (Nadal,2015).

For this study, it is vital to increase awareness about the challenges and obstacles faced by African Americans and other marginalized communities in their daily lives. To achieve this goal, microaggressions, microinsults, and microinvalidations must be recognized and addressed. These three M's represent different forms of subtle discrimination and biases that people from marginalized communities' encounter. By recognizing and addressing these micro-level experiences, we can strive towards creating a more inclusive and fair society.

Therefore, the three Ms are crucial to this study as they provide a framework for understanding the subtle forms of discrimination faced by African Americans and other diverse groups of people. This study has been designed to raise awareness about the obstacles and barriers African Americans and other diverse groups face daily. To achieve this, it is essential to recognize and acknowledge microaggressions, microinsults, and microinvalidations. These three M's represent different types of subtle discrimination and biases that people from marginalized

communities face in their everyday lives. By understanding and identifying these micro-level experiences, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

### **Microinterventions Strategies**

There are four goals for Microinterventions: (a) make the invisible visible, (b) disarm the microaggression, (c) educate the perpetrator, and (d) seek external reinforcement or support.

Microinterventions are defined as the everyday words or deeds, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate to targets of microaggressions (a) validation of their experiential reality, (b) value as a person, (c) affirmation of their racial or group identity, (d) support and encouragement, and (e) reassurance that they are not alone (Sue et al., 2019). Microinterventions offer a promising approach to facilitating behavioral change at the individual level. By understanding the foundations and mechanisms underlining micro-interventions, researchers and practitioners can harness their potential to address complex social challenges and implement the change we desire to see within our communities. Understanding the complex relationship between culture and identity, microaggression, and racial battle fatigue is vital for educational institutions to cultivate inclusive and diverse learning environments. By recognizing and addressing these factors, institutes can mitigate the adverse effects of microaggression and racial battle fatigue, creating spaces where all individuals have equal opportunities to thrive and succeed.

### **Personal Impact Analysis**

At this stage of research and self-reflection, it was important to evaluate how I have applied new knowledge so far. As a result of the significant professional growth and maturity I have achieved, I have acquired a deeper understanding of my development by analyzing my strengths, weaknesses, and gains. By analyzing my personal impact, I have gained a new

perspective on my experience. The uncomfortable truths about microaggressions, the archetypes of African American women, and racial battle fatigue that once left me wondering if I was the problem has been explored in my research. In addition to providing me with tools that enable me to thrive, my personal impact analysis has challenged me in new areas and enabled me to effectively hold myself and others accountable.

As a result of accountable conversations and forward-thinking discussions, I have gained insight as well as applied the S.W.A.G. framework to my personal growth and development. Through my work, I aim to empower other African American women who experience similar suppression within educational institutions. By analyzing the S.W.A.G. framework, literary resources, and terminology such as racial battle fatigue, other African American women will be able to articulate their experiences so that long-lasting policy changes can occur within educational institutions. They will also be able to access the resources they need to navigate their daily challenges within their professional environments.

As a researcher within a variety of educational institutions, I was often confused, unheard, ignored, and helpless before conducting studies on microaggressions, archetypes of African American women, and racial battle fatigue. My experience in the mail room at the central office or being mistaken for the janitorial staff indicates that inclusion and diversity are still not completed! Rather than holding grudges for others' lack of knowledge, I have strived to cultivate a sense of belonging and professional growth. With the S.W.A.G. framework, I have been able to reflect on my trials and better understand why I felt burdened at times as an African American woman in a leadership role.

In this section, I provide a comprehensive analysis of my growth journey, employing the S.W.A.G framework—Strengths, Weaknesses, Analyzing, and Gains to scrutinize my journey

and ascertain areas of improvement. S.W.A.G. is rooted in the esteemed tradition of SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is defined as the planning and collaboration tool used to assist businesses and people with evaluating a project or idea to formulate a business plan (Harmon, 2022). I draw inspiration from the SWOT framework known for exploring Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats to construct a new approach toward introspection and growth. I also reflect on my experiences: how I have demonstrated resilience throughout my journey, and how I have utilized my experiences to gain insight and understanding. This historical connection gives the S.W.A.G. framework depth and legitimacy, rendering it a valuable tool for personal and professional growth.

The foundation of the S.W.A.G. framework finds its roots in the strategic landscape of corporate analysis, where the SWOT framework reigns supreme. Like its predecessor, S.W.A.G. probes into the intricate fabric of internal and external factors, unraveling the shield of personal development. As I relate the two frameworks, I highlight the interconnectivity of seemingly disparate areas, creating a narrative of continuation and evolution. The relevance of the SWOT framework lends significance and credibility to the emergent S.W.A.G. concept. SWOT has served as a cornerstone for businesses as they navigate turbulent market dynamics since the beginning of strategic thinking.

By leveraging this rich historical background, the S.W.A.G. framework inherits a legacy of strategic acumen, positioning itself as a powerful tool for personal and professional development. As I journey through the tangled pathways of self-discovery, the S.W.A.G. framework emerges as a trusted guide, illuminating hidden truths and unveiling untapped potential. Through the lens of introspection, I navigate the terrain of personal development with

newfound clarity and purpose. Each revelation is a steppingstone, propelling me towards a more authentic and empowered existence. Below, each letter of S.W.A.G is explained.

**Strengths:**

Central to the S.W.A.G. framework is a comprehensive exploration of overused abilities, often overlooked components of personal growth. Through introspection and analysis, I have uncovered instances where my claimed strengths may veer into excess, hindering rather than propelling progress. By spotlighting these areas, I pave the way for recalibration and refinement, fostering a more balanced and sustainable approach to self-improvement.

Initially, I embarked on this journey with a clear awareness of my strengths, particularly my tenacity and problem-solving prowess. However, through introspection and engagement with others, I realized that my perceived strengths had become my Achilles' heel. The unwavering belief that I had to face challenges alone led me to doubt myself and question my validity, fostering feelings of imposter syndrome. Yet, through concerted efforts and self-reflection, I discovered that embracing vulnerability and acknowledging my unique perspective fortified my resilience and efficacy. I now feel more confident about my strengths, thanks to valuable personal experiences. My experiences have allowed me to develop a newfound sense of confidence and become more courageous in calling out microaggression. Using this research, I can advocate for the necessity of diversity and inclusion in educational institutions.

**Weaknesses:**

In the past, I misconceived weakness as a permanent force that hindered my growth. I discovered that my alleged weaknesses became liabilities, revealing the importance of honesty and recognizing areas for improvement. My tendency to internalize doubts and self-criticism hindered my ability to navigate interpersonal dynamics effectively, creating internal conflict.

Tenacity and drive, once my biggest weaknesses, have now become my greatest strengths. I assumed that no one had faced my challenges, making me doubt myself and feel like an imposter. I would get stuck in my head, thinking I was being a crazy, dramatic overachiever. Now, I have learned to let go of those assumptions and trust that my unique perspective and experiences are valuable. It is not always easy, but I am working on embracing my vulnerabilities and turning them into strengths.

**Analysis:**

I leveraged my newfound confidence to initiate candid conversations about the pervasive phenomenon of racial battle fatigue. I clarified its impact on marginalized communities while advocating for systemic change. As an African American woman in an educational institution, I know firsthand the toll this can take on our mental and physical well-being. I have been thinking a lot about ways to foster transparency and conversation around the realities of racial battle fatigue. I'm analyzing when and how to have safe, courageous conversations about this critical issue. It's time to open up and start talking about the challenges we face so that we can work together to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone.

**Gains:**

The outcome of my journey led me to a profound realization: I possess the agency to create change and amplify my voice in spaces often devoid of diversity and inclusion. The transformative power of self-reflection and introspection has empowered me to communicate assertively and advocate for equitable practices. With newfound confidence and conviction, I have embraced the opportunity to champion transparency and foster dialogue around pressing societal issues, catalyzing a paradigm shift within educational institutions. Reflecting on my gains, I realized how much I have learned about myself and my abilities. The best part was

recognizing that my gains resulted from my hard work and determination. This experience has given me the confidence to communicate more effectively, both verbally and non-verbally. I now have the tools to articulate my thoughts and ideas with credibility and conviction, providing evidence for my statements and backing up my claims. I am grateful for this experience and the valuable lessons it has taught me. I am excited to continue growing and learning from my gains and can't wait to see where this newfound confidence takes me next!

In conclusion, the S.W.A.G. framework has been a guiding force in my journey of self-discovery and transformative growth. This strategic analysis tool has allowed me to delve deep into my strengths, weaknesses, and personal impact, providing a comprehensive understanding of my development. By addressing the uncomfortable truths about microaggression, racial battle fatigue, and the archetypes of African American women, I have been able to hold myself and others accountable. This process has empowered me to articulate my experiences in order to advocate for the necessary changes within educational institutes.

Through the S.W.A.G. framework, I have transformed my perceived strengths and weaknesses into a catalyst for change, fostering a balanced and sustainable approach to self-improvement. My journey has also highlighted the importance of vulnerability and introspection, enabling me to enhance my unique perspective and experiences with confidence. As I continue to navigate my personal and professional development, I am emboldened by the realization that my journey is a part of a larger collective quest for authenticity and inclusivity. Ultimately, this experience has equipped me with the tools to communicate assertively and advocate for equitable practices. I am grateful for the valuable lessons learned and newfound confidence gained, and I am excited to continue to grow and make a positive impact in my professional environment.

*“I’m no longer accepting the things I cannot change... I’m changing the things I cannot accept.”  
-Angela Davis*

## **Chapter 2: Analysis of Self-Concepts and the Literature**

In this chapter, I reflect on how culture, identity, and the experiences of African American women intersect with the realities of leadership. Through both personal stories and research, I examine how race and background shape our professional lives. I question the longstanding stereotypes that still shape perceptions of African American women by looking at the historical narratives that continue to influence these views. I also examine the emotional effects of daily biases and the exhaustion that comes from constantly battling racial challenges. By sharing my own journey, I connect to the shared experiences of many African American women, offering thoughts on how we can keep finding strength in spaces where inclusivity is often missing. Because I am an African American woman, I am unable to separate my identity and my cultural heritage. In almost any professional situation, I am viewed as a Black woman - not as a woman first and then as an African American, but as both simultaneously.

### **Culture and Identity**

In this section, I use the term “identity” to describe physical attributes such as skin color. These are characteristics that apply to me as an individual. According to Reeves and Plets (2015), the term “culture” refers to cultural heritage and the shared experiences of a community of people in a similar position. This includes the unspoken rules of the African American community that I happen to belong to. For the purpose and clarity of this work, when I refer to my lived experiences, I will use identity or culture dependent upon the context that I am referencing.

This section will draw on relevant literature and research studies that explore the experiences of African American women within educational institutions. I will examine the intersection of race, gender, and culture by analyzing the factors influencing their academic journeys, self-perceptions, and aspirations. As someone who has experienced both RBF and microaggressions, it is important for me to share my experiences. In addition to sharing my personal stories, this dissertation also explores my experiences. In sharing my experiences and vulnerabilities, I hope to give African American women suffering in silence a voice.

As the world around us continues to evolve, gaining insight into African American women leaders' culture and identity is important because culture and identity impact our educational institutions and workplace experiences (Hughes, 2014). Furthermore, the stereotypes these leaders face can lead to imposter syndrome, further complicated by a lack of representation and acceptance of systemic inequities as social norms (Leiba, 2022). By gaining insights into the experiences of African American women leaders, educational institutes can develop targeted initiatives, policies, and support systems that address their unique needs, foster inclusivity, and empower them to achieve their full potential to sustain leadership roles.

In 2014, Robinson conducted a phenomenological study to explore the experiences of African American women in school leadership roles. The study involved ten African American women leaders who served as principals, assistant principals, district leaders, and facilitators. Their experiences serving in different capacities provided more insight into sociocultural experiences (Robinson, 2014). Although many exciting facts emerged from the study, one of the interesting connections was the expectations, responsibilities, and influence their parents had on the participants.

The study's research question was: "How do culture and identity affect African American women in educational institutions?" (Robinson, 2014). The study argued that understanding where African American women gain their strength, support, and leadership skills is essential for understanding how they govern their schools, corporations, and other educational institutions for learning and leadership development. Robinson found that while some women depend on their faith, others apply leadership skills they obtained as children from their families. Culture and identity play a pivotal role in shaping these individuals' experiences and interactions within educational settings.

For African American women, their identities are multifaceted and influenced by their racial identities. The experiences of African American women are shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts that have shaped the African American community, as well as the unique challenges and opportunities they have encountered as women of color. Understanding and embracing the intersectionality of their identities is crucial in creating inclusive spaces that validate and empower African American women and their educational pursuits (Robinson, 2014).

Whether in educational institutions or corporate workspaces, the inability to distinguish between personal culture and organizational culture can create tension. According to Jennifer Brown's 2019 book *How to Be an Inclusive Leader*, "when companies and leaders fail to cultivate inclusive environments, employees will vote with their feet, leaving to seek better options where they will be embraced" (p. 6). As we consider African American women as leaders, managers, and executives, we should take time to learn about their past experiences and cultural perspectives. Leadership experiences affect how African American women are perceived in the majority of non-inclusive educational institutions and workplaces.

Over the years, various models of leadership have been developed. For example, in her 1996 article, *Gender, Culture, and Leadership Toward a Culturally Distinct Model of African American Women Executives' Leadership Strategies*, Parker noted two types of culturally distinct leadership models that are rarely discussed. The first culturally distinct model was described as a predominant model based on an “Anglo-male hierarchical approach.” In contrast, the second model was depicted as a “distinctly female” model. The article describes the birth of both styles, formulated from the middle-class Anglo-American perspective. Power and authority are not usually associated with African American women in the leadership literature. Conversely, the second leadership model was identified as distinctly female. The article's findings suggest that both leadership models are culturally distinct because they originate from middle-class Anglo-male hierarchical leadership. The "distinctly female" model illustrates culturally distinct leadership (Parker, 1996).

### **Workplace Culture**

Culture in the workplace is a complex subject. One of the many challenges African American women face is being judged before they practice and implement their skill set. This section illuminates that some African American women must learn quickly, assess the environment, and adjust to their working surroundings as they enter educational institutions or non-inclusive workspaces. According to Hughes (2014), “If the American Black woman does not assimilate, she is excluded from the path to career success. If she does try to assimilate, she may be perceived as superficial and is again excluded from the path to career success” (p.2). Hughes (2014) points out that African American women did not create themselves, but they are often punished for who they are before they even have a chance to begin work on their jobs.

This illustrates that African American women face unique challenges and barriers within educational institutions and non-inclusive workspaces that can contribute to their success or lack thereof. Negative workplace cultures often create significant challenges for African American women, impacting their professional lives in profound ways. These environments can be rife with negative experiences and barriers that hinder their career advancement and overall well-being. When workplace culture is toxic, it does not just affect day-to-day tasks; it permeates every aspect of an employee's experience.

For African American women, these challenges can be particularly acute. They frequently face obstacles others might not encounter, such as microaggressions, implicit biases, and exclusion from critical networks and opportunities. (Kohli, 2016). This hostile environment not only stifles their productivity and engagement but also undermines their mental health, leading to burnout and high turnover rates. Studies have shown that a positive workplace culture can significantly enhance employee productivity, engagement, and retention (Robinson, 2014). Conversely, a negative culture can have devastating effects, leading to isolation, unfair treatment, and even outright discrimination. For African American women, these negative experiences are not just frustrating, they are barriers that can severely limit their career success and personal fulfillment.

The article "*Black Women Talk About Workplace Stress and How They Cope*" highlights stressors such as discrimination and coping mechanisms that African American women face, as well as the barriers they must overcome. Stereotypes, excessive demands, the absence of mentoring, being ignored, and assumptions of incompetence are some of the biases in the workplace (Hall et al., n.d.). These biases shape a negative workplace experience. For example, a participant shared a story about feeling like she was constantly under a microscope. She said,

"You feel like you're underneath a microscope. Everybody's looking at you and making judgments about how you're going to act. How are you going to react? Unfortunately, if it's anything close to the stereotype, you'll be branded, and the spotlight will be on you. I guess I'm used to being in the fishbowl and the pressure cooker" (Hall et al., n.d.). These stories suggest that these experiences are all too common. Addressing these issues is crucial. By fostering inclusive and supportive workplace cultures, organizations can help African American women and all employees thrive. This not only benefits the individuals but also contributes to the overall success and health of the organization.

Everyday experiences like these add to the regular stressors and complexities of being African American in a leadership capacity. Leiba (2022) said, "It was empowering, exhilarating, and terrifying to realize that this validation I had been yearning for my entire life was something I did not even desire anymore; my dreams, goals, and purpose were much bigger." Instances like these are unfortunate but not uncommon. When I go to work, I mentally prepare myself every day. It is like I am putting on a suit of armor to shield myself from the daily microaggressions and racial battle fatigue that I face as an African American woman.

### **Personal Culture**

African American women leaders identify as individuals and leaders in their communities in various ways. Maintaining a balance between family, careers, and spirituality can contribute positively and directly impact the strength needed to thrive in these roles and spaces. Hughes (2014) yields insight into the direct effects of culture and identity by saying that African American females' success is treated as a negative because of the leadership styles and delivery used to achieve the organizations' goals - even if they display the same characteristics as others who are rewarded (Hughes, 2014; Robinson, 2014).

African American culture has a rich history of resiliency, community, and celebration, which influences how African American women navigate educational spaces. Cultural practices, values, and traditional contributions to their sense of self shape their academic aspirations, self-confidence, and perceptions of success. Recognizing and celebrating African American culture within educational institutes can foster a sense of belonging, pride, and connectedness for African American women, positively impacting their academic achievements and overall well-being (Robinson, 2014). It is essential to understand that African American women who are leaders in the community will be governed by the leadership principles shaped by society. How are obstacles, such as microaggressions, likely to affect the quality of their leadership as well as their culture and identity if they are governed by these principles? African American women leaders have the unique opportunity to share their life experiences with students of color and colleagues across the country, which can be influential in improving the chance of students of color succeeding in school and increasing the retention issues for retaining talented women of color across the United States (Carber-Thomas, n.d.).

In addition to the responsibilities they are tasked with as educational leaders, African American women are often tasked with overcoming unprecedented barriers that they did not know existed - the importance of building relationships and gently minimizing stereotypes before their arrival. The responsibility of repairing educational biases and rethinking school culture should not be placed on African American women, despite the inequalities in education and educational institutions.

Finally, this section discusses the challenges African American women face in leadership roles, particularly in navigating their complex identities and cultural clashes in societies facing discrimination and unethical practices. Throughout this study, African American women

highlight their unique experiences and responsibilities, including balancing family, career, and spirituality and overcoming unprecedented barriers. The importance of building relationships, minimizing stereotypes, and repairing educational biases in educational institutions is also discussed. This research highlights the impact of cultural practices on African American women's academic aspirations, self-confidence, and perceptions of success.

### **Collective Culture**

Cultural identity is closely aligned with support systems that African American women form with other African American women who face the same challenges or have overcome the challenges to seek and provide guidance, validation, and confirmation (Denton, 1990). These connections also intend to examine the significance and effects of a non-inclusive, diversified educational culture and identify and describe personal interpretations of culture, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue.

For some, the importance of education was instilled in them from a young age and considered the catalyst for increasing their quality of life (Robinson, 1995). Education is highly encouraged in African American families to improve the quality of life and standard of living within the family. At times, obtaining education is associated with “breaking the curse” or what is also known as generational curses. Despite the level of schooling achieved by the participants, their parents influenced their children to strive for higher learning. Some participants added that their parents assured them that education unlocked a better quality of life (Robinson, 1995). Henrietta, a doctoral student and a participant in the study, shared that her parents were not highly educated, but they stressed the importance of education and respecting others (Robinson, 1995). Years later, these values and mindsets are echoed across many households, churches, and support groups. The research continues to concur with what has been stated numerous times that

learning more about the experiences of African American women in leadership roles can offer a rich opportunity to gain information that will best support the rise of African American women pursuing leadership roles.

In this section, we examined the experiences of African American women in educational institutions, analyzing the intersection of race, gender, and culture. It explored the impact of culture and identity, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue on inclusion and diversity in educational institutions and workplaces.

### **Archetypes of African American women**

Several archetypes have been associated with African American women throughout history. An archetype embodies African American womanhood, as seen through historical narratives, cultural representations, and contemporary discourse. Archetypes are not only stereotypes, but they can also be unwelcome essential coping skills used to survive in non-inclusive institutions of higher learning.

The Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel Archetypes of African American womanhood were explored in my research. For decades, African American women have been stereotyped into mythical categories that continue to plague the minds of society. Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel were some of the stereotypes of African American women that originated from slavery (Thomas et al., 2004). In the United States, particularly in the southern regions, the word "mammy" or "mammie" refers to a negative stereotype. Mythologizing African American women started in books and films as early as 1852 (*Mammy et al.*). Mammies were described and depicted through movies and television shows as overweight African American women with no education, dark-skinned, large hips, big lips, and large shoulders servants for the slave master's children, providing for their needs and sometimes even using manipulative methods such as “wet

nursing”. The mammy, more times than not negated her own needs and the needs of her family to care for others who held her in bondage (Thomas et al., 2004). An example is Aibileen Clark, the character played by Viola Davis in the movie *The Help* (Leiber & Wheeler, n.d.). Although the Mammy archetype is depicted as a figure of comfort and stability, it is filled with contradictions, reflecting the dehumanizing effects of systemic oppression.

The second stereotype is the Sapphire stereotype. Amos and Andy, a radio and television show from the 1940s and 1950s that focused on African American entertainment, inspired the Sapphire African American woman. The Sapphire was depicted as loud, nagging, argumentative, and master of verbal assaults (Thomas et al., 2004). There were many reasons to be alarmed by this stereotype, including the perception that she was arrogant, hostile, obnoxious, constantly unsatisfied, and sometimes even funny (Thomas et al., 2004). Historically, it was believed that women with these characteristics could only be seen and heard if they played into the stereotypes of society. For an example of a Sapphire African American woman, we can think of American actress, comedian, author, and television personality Whoopi Goldberg because she is unapologetic about her refusal to accept a world that diminishes African American women and is willing to challenge the status quo.

Thirdly, we have the Jezebel stereotype. Perhaps the most enduring and pernicious stereotype of African American women’s sexuality, the Jezebel archetype perpetuates harmful myths of hypersexuality and moral depravity. The Jezebel stereotype was described as seductive, manipulative, hypersexual, and having uncontrollable sex drives (Thomas et al., 2004). Generally, Jezebels were perceived as promiscuous, self-aggressive, and disobedient to sexual restraints. The remnants of the Jezebel stereotype are alive and well and can be viewed throughout movies and mainstream media. Take into account a slave named Sarah Baartman,

whose physical features led to her being exploited - displayed in an enclosed cage - naked for the amusement of paying audiences (*The Life and Times of Sara Baartman - The Hottentot Venus (1998): Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming*, 2019). This dehumanizing portrayal not only objectifies African American women's bodies but also attempts to justify their exploitation and marginalization within broader society. Despite its pervasive influence, the Jezebel archetype serves as a poignant reminder of the intersectional struggles faced by African American women as they navigate the intersecting axes of race, gender, and sexuality. In my experience, dismantling these archetypes is difficult because of the systematic racism embedded in them. Geyton (2022) agrees and states, "The combination of racism, sexism, and the consistent failures of society to recognize the Black woman in her entirety creates social isolation and the need for self-reliance.

As an African American woman, I have found myself categorized by my peers as a Sapphire archetype, which has led me to suppress my emotions. This suppression resulted in frustration and feeling unheard in the workplace while forcing me to guard my mental and physical well-being in environments where I did not feel a sense of belonging. It is reminiscent of the emotional suppression experienced by slaves, who were often subjected to abuse and forced to numb their feelings. This emotional suppression created a stark disconnect between my identity and workplace experiences, leading me to carry the shield, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. I have been conditioned to believe that I must always appear strong, even when not feeling strong.

These archetypes perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to the stress and psychological burden that African American women face. For some African American women, stressors in the workplace have caused severe health conditions, including high blood pressure, depression, and obesity (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Research surrounding how African American women deal

with stress has not been fully explored and studied. The pervasive influence of stereotypes plays a crucial role in shaping the negative experience of African American women in the workplace. These archetypes, often entrenched in societal norms, can lead to microaggressions, microinsults, microinvalidations, and racial battle fatigue.

In conclusion, exploring the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel archetypes reveals the intricate interplay of race, gender, and power within the construction of the African American woman identity. These archetypes serve as potent symbols of resistance, embodying the myriad ways African American women have navigated and contested societal expectations throughout history. It is the reality of my role as an African American woman and leader that I am expected to put on a good act, do more with less, and appear to do better than people expect. By linking the understanding of racial battle fatigue with the investigation of these archetypes and health implications, we can better appreciate the multifaceted challenges African American women encounter.

African Americans accumulate emotional and physiological baggage after being required to perform, function, and thrive in the world that was created with the goal of black people failing on multiple levels (Acuff, 2018). Whether they hold multiple degrees or have only obtained a high school diploma, many African American women share similar stories. From working at an educational institution to being charged as the leader, the stress of having double consciousness is exhausting. W.E.B. Du Bois explains in *The Souls of Black Folk* that *double consciousness* is when black people must always look at themselves through the eyes of others, measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (1903). Double-consciousness and racial battle fatigue may have the same DNA characteristics as fraternal twins, in the sense that racial battle fatigue, defined by William A. Smith, involves the

cumulative impact of racial microaggressions related to psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress (Franklin, 2016). Although, in some cases, fraternal twins' physical characteristics are different, they share the same bloodline. Similarly, the archetypes of Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel are deeply intertwined with these concepts. These stereotypes contribute to the experiences of microaggression and microassaults, and microinvalidations that lead to racial battle fatigue. Understanding these archetypes helps us appreciate the multifaceted challenges African American women face.

### **Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF)**

The purpose of this section is to provide a comprehensive understanding of racial battle fatigue (RBF) and to investigate the nuanced complexity and diverse manifestation of African American women's identity that shapes this multifaceted construct. The concept of RBF has a profound effect on African American women. Racial battle fatigue is a state of psychological, emotional, and physical exhaustion that arises from navigating the world designed to hinder the success of African American women in leadership roles (Acuff, 2018). RBF is psychologically heavy, emotionally tiring, and physically draining. Understanding the complexity surrounding RBF is crucial for several reasons. Recognizing occurrences of RBF allows people to have a conversation that is no longer shrouded in opinion but yet supported through common experiences noted in the research. Knowing the research on RBF also enables us to recognize and validate the experiences of African American women who face racial discrimination daily (Acuff, 2018).

By gaining a deeper understanding of the effects of RBF and the toll it has on African American women, individuals can foster empathy, practice compassion, and support African American women in leadership positions within educational institutions (Knighton et al., 2021).

This research intends to inform leaders of evidence-based interventions that effectively address and alleviate RBF by identifying effective coping mechanisms and support systems. This research can contribute to the well-being and empowerment of individuals from marginalized subgroups and ethnic groups, ultimately fostering a more equitable and inclusive learning and work environment.

The effects of stress, health conditions, and racial battle fatigue, as well as microaggressions on African American women, have been described as among the adversities they face in the workplace and educational institutions. The pervasive stereotypes embodied in the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel archetypes not only reinforce harmful biases but also exacerbate the psychological and emotional toll captured by the concept of RBF. Recognizing these intersections allows for a more comprehensive approach to addressing the specific needs and challenges of African American women, ultimately fostering a more informed and supportive environment. African American women are often placed in unique and challenging positions, feeling out of place and undervalued. This sense of alienation drives them to seek employment elsewhere – somewhere where diversity and inclusion are not just crucial for leadership, but a priority for all employees within the organization. When working in institutions such as schools or corporations, research also revealed that racism against teachers of color took a toll on their well-being, growth, and retention (Kohli, 2018.). For example, there was a moment in time when women did not have the right to vote in the United States of America. Women began voting in the 1920s after Congress passed the 19th Amendment (*19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women's Right to Vote (1920)*, (Jones, 2020); however, this did not include all women. African American women were not afforded the same rights until five decades later. The fatigue of marching and protesting to have the same rights as other women is only one of many

examples of how RBF has always been an underlying issue in this country. If these and other types of messages, whether verbal or non-verbal, are not opposed, educational institutions will continue to face the debilitating effects of the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stressors of RBF (Jones, 2020). Acuff (2018) wrote, “I have found that my coping strategies do not rid me of RBF; the strategies simply provide me with some comfort and resolution when emotions stirred by racist acts overwhelm my psyche and affect my overall well-being.”

Moreover, this research sheds light on the detrimental impacts of racial microaggressions and hostile racial climates within educational institutes. African American women often face isolation, undervaluation, and questioning of their effectiveness, leading to feelings of being out of place and undervalued (Hall et al., n.d.). These experiences contribute to the accumulation of RBF and may drive individuals to seek employment and environments that prioritize diversity and inclusion (Leiba, 2022). Understanding racial battle fatigue is crucial for fostering empathy, compassion, and support for African American women who encounter racial discrimination daily.

By acknowledging the effects of RBF, individuals can work towards implementing evidence-based practice interventions and support systems that alleviate its toll. This research contributes to the well-being and empowerment of marginalized communities, such as African American women, by promoting more equitable and inclusive environments in educational institutes and workplaces. The symptoms of RBF increase the urgency to address the impact of Racial Battle Fatigue on individuals' overall well-being.

From the research shared in this section, empathizing, and using evidence-based interventions, we can create a more supportive, inclusive, and equitable workplace for African American women by fostering their success, empowerment, and well-being. In this section, we

analyzed the experiences of African American women in educational institutions and the impact of identity, culture, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue on inclusion and diversity. Racial battle fatigue must be understood from a cultural perspective. For me, it's about recognizing the heavy load I bear due to the constant discrimination, microaggressions, and injustices I face daily as a member of a marginalized racial group. Carrying this burden means enduring the relentless pressure and fatigue that come with navigating a society saturated with systemic racism.

Acknowledging this burden is important because it validates my experiences and those of others like me. It underscores the urgency for systemic change to alleviate the weight of racism and create environments where African American can thrive without this constant weight on our shoulders. It is essential to understand and address the burden to promote well-being and inclusion in educational institutions.

### **Microaggressions**

"The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything." - Albert Einstein.

Fostering inclusivity and promoting equality is critical for the development of individuals serving in any capacity in an educational institution. This section of the research will focus on whether microaggressions are becoming so common that we have accepted them as a norm within educational institutions and workplaces. This research intends to provide an overview of microaggression, focusing on its impact and prevalence in various social environments.

Nonetheless, despite the progress made or the lack thereof, African American women continue to face subtle forms of discrimination known as microaggressions. Could it be that we have forgotten the consequences of microaggressions on people of color? We seek to gain a better understanding of the social and environmental impact of microaggressions and its effects on

African American women in educational institutions and workplaces. As a result, the underlying causes of microaggressions can be identified, as well as some of the influences contributing to the prevailing mindset on microaggressions.

Throughout this section, we will explore the concept of microaggression, the different forms, and their effects on individuals and communities. I will define microaggressions and discuss how they impact our day-to-day lives, analyze if you have ever experienced a microaggression while in an educational institution or work environment, and find ways to support yourself and others with Microinterventions. It is crucial to explain how the prefix to the term might minimize the emphasis on micro. When the prefix microaggression is used, it may be misinterpreted as being small or minimal. However, in this study, the prefix has a greater significance to amplify (Sue & Spanierman, 2020).

In the article "*I Want to Speak to a White Person*": *Daily Microaggressions and Resilient Leadership*, microaggressions were described as the “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which lie beneath visibility or consciousness and which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults” (Cyr et al., 2021). The three M's of microaggression are microaggressions, microinsults, and microinvalidations. These microaggressions are the components driving my study on the impact of microaggression and its effects on African American women leaders.

### **The 3 M's of Microaggressions**

The term microaggression is a pervasive phenomenon that affects various marginalized groups (Cyr et al., 2021) (Kohli, 2016) (*Microaggression Definition & Meaning*, n.d.). Microaggression has been defined in several ways, but the definitions remain similar. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, microaggression refers to a comment or action that subtly

and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group, such as a racial minority (*Microaggression Definition & Meaning*, n.d.).

Rita Kohli, on the other hand, defined racial microaggressions as "everyday assaults directed at people of Color and rooted in factors associated with race such as language and culture." In the article "*I Want to Speak to a White Person*": *Daily Microaggressions and Resilient Leadership*, microaggressions were defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which lies beneath visibility or consciousness and which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults" (Cyr et al., 2021) (Kohli, 2016) These seemingly harmless remarks, gestures, or actions can significantly impact the targeted individuals and perpetuate system inequalities. Chester Middle Pierce, a Harvard University professor and African American Psychiatrist, coined the term microaggression during his work with African Americans (Sue & Spanierman, 2020).

Microaggressions can be subtle, intentional, and unintentional forms of discrimination or bias that occur in everyday interactions.

The effects of microaggression can have a profound and detrimental impact on the social identities of African American women. Nadal and colleagues' study (2015) highlights the experiences of African American participants who were consistently subjected to intellectually demeaning treatment. Worse still, they were frequently stereotyped as criminals and relegated to second-class citizenship (Nadal et al., 2015). Cultures rooted in these experiences are unacceptable in any workplace and social environment and have no place in a society that is just and equitable. Despite ongoing research, there is still much to learn about the impact of microaggression, particularly on African American women in leadership roles and how it shapes their leadership styles. Microaggressions, which are subtle or indirect forms of discrimination,

can create a hostile work environment for African American women and may negatively affect their confidence, job satisfaction, and career advancement. Furthermore, microaggressions can also impact their leadership style by causing them to adopt a more authoritarian or collaborative approach. Therefore, it is essential to address this issue and develop strategies to mitigate the effects of microaggressions in educational institutions.

*Reflecting on my experience as a new hire, I remember gaining the keys to the building, obtaining the necessary clearances to be inside the building, and beginning the process of moving into my new space when I was stopped by what seemed to be a curious employee. Despite wearing a badge, the employee questioned who I was and what I was doing. I had a cart of materials that could have been mistaken as trash, and when I sarcastically answered that I was the new janitor, the employee seemed to be relieved. But it wasn't until the introduction went out enterprise wide that I was a new administrator that this employee realized that our interaction was plagued with assumptions harvested by microaggressions. This interaction was puzzling and disheartening because when the employees felt that I was "beneath them" and I did not pose a threat, they were okay and relieved. However, when the employee realized that I was a person of authority, I was quickly deemed a threat.*

Although some Americans believe in a post-racial society, these ideologies no longer experience the stereotypes that surround African American women, such as cultural norms, intelligence, and work ethics, which still exist in our society today. There have been a few studies that have described microaggression as a form of discrimination that is often unintentional and unconscious, sending negative and demeaning messages to various groups and individuals (Nadal et al., 2015). Educational institutions and workplaces that provide services are rife with microaggressions. From the institutions we attend, to our employment environments,

and the teachers in classrooms to the leadership we see in our district and executive leadership teams, microaggressions plague us every day. Researchers note that African American women who encounter race-related stressors, such as racial microaggression, stereotype threats, and tokenism, are underrepresented in the existing literature (Allen et al., 2019). Considering the world in which we live, I have been brought up in a society where, every day, I am confronted by microaggressions, and I must maintain a vigilant approach to how I conduct myself in public places.

According to the US Department of Education, in 2019, African American women continued to earn a higher education (*The Condition of Education 2019*). Due to academic achievements, African American women with higher education may be at risk for encountering racial microaggressions compared to their counterparts (Knighton et al., 2022). Although many interesting facts emerged from the study, one interesting connection was the expectations, responsibilities, and influence parents had on the participants. Despite the level of schooling achieved by the participants, their parents influenced their children to strive for higher learning (Knighton et al., 2022).

As we continue the research in analyzing the experiences of African American women, it is only fair to discuss their experiences with those of their ancestors. During slavery, slaveowners killed African Americans when they discovered that they knew how to read and write (Hughes, 2014). White Americans also would assault or murder African American men and women for obtaining an education. Although, this data does not compare to the abuse endured by slavery ancestors; the mentality and psychological experience are closely aligned.

In educational institutions and workplace environments, racial microaggression has a significant impact on the psychological well-being of African American women. The research

continues to concur with scholars' numerous assertions that learning more about the experiences of African American women in leadership roles can offer a rich opportunity to gain information that will best support upcoming African American women pursuing leadership roles (Parker, n.d.) (Sue et al., 2019), (Leiba, 2022). It's crucial to recognize the significant impact education has on our lives. Harmful behavior must be addressed, and researchers and social activities have proven that micro-interventions are effective. These interventions, though small, can make a significant difference. These interventions are small but effective actions that can cause a difference. By exploring current and existing research, theories, and personal stories, the study of this section will shed light on how microinterventions can contribute to creating safer and more inclusive spaces for everyone.

When African American women experience microaggressions in educational or work environments, there are adverse effects for African American women. Microaggressions impact African American women's daily lives. In the book *Microaggression in Everyday Life* (Sue, 2010), examples of microaggression, microassaults, microinvalidation, and preventative measures such as microinterventions. This explanation sheds light on the subtle yet impactful forms of discrimination that people experience based on their racial, gender, and sexual orientation identities. The explanation provided examples of microaggressions that represent the nuanced manifestations of discrimination. These examples describe themes such as criminality, traditional gender role prejudicing and stereotyping, demeaning cultural values and communication styles, and more (Smith, Griffiths, 2022). The table identifies prevalent microaggressions, such as ascribing intelligence to someone based on their social-group identity. For instance, people of color may be assumed to have less intelligence or be given unfair benefits because of their race.

Additionally, the discussion extends to the theme of criminality, where individuals of color are unjustly perceived as dangerous or criminal solely due to their race. Instances of clutching purses, following customers of color in stores, or avoiding shared spaces exemplify how these microaggressions perpetuate systemic biases and foster an environment of fear and mistrust (Sue et al., 2019). Moreover, the table and literature surrounding these findings explore denying individual bias. It illustrates how individuals often deflect accountability by making statements like "I am not racist." "I have several black friends," thereby negating the presence of personal prejudices. This phenomenon highlights the importance of self-awareness and introspection in recognizing and addressing implicit biases.

There are several ways by which microaggressions, microinterventions, and microinvalidations could yield an understanding of how these factors play a role in racial battle fatigue (Sue et al., 2019). By addressing these critical issues, we can strive towards a more just and inclusive society that supports the well-being of all individuals despite their race or ethnic background.

### **Microinterventions**

Microinterventions have gained significant attention in recent years as promising approaches to facilitate behavioral change at the individual level. Microinterventions have increased not only for African American women but also for other marginalized racial groups (Sue et al., 2019). In this study, we discuss the mechanisms that make microinterventions effective and their ethical implications. Narolyn Mendez defined microinterventions as the everyday words or deeds, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate to targets of microaggressions (a) validation of their experiential reality, (b) value as a person, (c) affirmation of their racial or group identity, (d) support and encouragement, and (e) reassurance that they are

not alone (Sue et al., 2019). Microinterventions are described as ways to fight the lack of knowledge in non-inclusive workspace by those who allow bias and inaccurate statements to overshadow the knowledge of African American women in leadership roles.

Microinterventions are effective empirically, and I will highlight implications for their use in real-world settings. This section provides strategies for those who have encountered microaggression with microinterventions to help dismantle microaggressions. It is increasingly clear that microaggression and racial battle fatigue affect African American women in leadership positions. Yet, despite the growing awareness of racial battle fatigue, there is still a critical gap in understanding effective interventions to counter its adverse effects.

According to Sue et al. (2019), over 75% of African Americans recorded experiencing daily discrimination. Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, and Native Americans also reported significantly higher discriminatory experiences than their white counterparts. The research suggests that equipping people with mental tools such as microinterventions to combat microaggression can prevent further harm caused by microaggression, microassaults, and microinsults. Whether reporting to work on their first day or shopping, many African American women have been faced with microaggression while trying to earn a living or enjoying leisure time, whether alone or with family and friends.

An example from my own experience is the time I attended an off-site event at the Central Office as an Assistant Principal. *My principal asked me to check our mailbox and retrieve any mail inside. To gain access to the mailroom, you had to have clearance through your employee identification badge, which I did. As instructed, I entered the mailroom and began searching for the mailbox that belonged to our school. As my back was turned to the door, a secretary entered the room and asked me, "Do you need any help?" I quickly answered, "No."*

*However, I never turned around to allow the individual to see my face. The individual continued to stand there. She went on to ask me, "Do you need help locating a mailbox?" and again, I replied, "No," and never turned around. The individual continued to stand there, and finally, when I decided to turn around, her face was completely red, and she said, "Oh, Ranesa, I didn't know that was you."* This nonverbal communication indicated to me that a) she did not think I was supposed to be there and b) she felt she was no longer in danger because she knew this African American person. Bias and discrimination go unchallenged because the behaviors and words are disguised in ways that provide cover for their expression and the beliefs that they are harmless and insignificant (Sue et al., 2019). As stated throughout this chapter, racial battle fatigue is defined as racial microaggressions related to psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress. Constantly being exposed to racial discrimination, microaggression, and systemic racism contributes to the emotional, cognitive, and physical toll that racialized individuals endure as a result of navigating racial-charged environments.

By examining the potential of microinterventions in combating racial battle fatigue, this study contributes to the existing body of literature on racial stress and coping. Moreover, the findings inform the development of evidence-based interventions that can be applied in various settings, including educational institutes, workplaces, and community organizations, to support marginalized groups of people. Throughout this research, it is my aim to shed light on the potential of microinterventions to alleviate the burden of racial battle fatigue and foster greater well-being among marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

Microaggression has become an increasingly prevalent issue in our society. To combat this problem, following a four-pronged approach that involves (a) recognizing the "invisible," (b) disarming the microaggression, (c) educating the offender about their nonverbal cues, and (d)

seeking external support when needed (Sue et al., 2019). By implementing this strategy, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and respectful society where everyone can feel safe and valued.

Microinterventions offer opportunities for positive change. It is crucial, however, to ensure that microinterventions respect individuals' autonomy, privacy, and well-being. Informed conscience, transparency, and avoidance of manipulations are essential principles to hold up when designing and implementing microinterventions. A goal of rigorous oversight should be in place to safeguard against potential risks and unintentional consequences. Research studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of microinterventions across various domains (Sue et al., 2019). In the context of education, my complete interventions have shown promise in improving academic performance, motivation, and study habits.

Furthermore, microinterventions have been applied to promote positive environmental behaviors, reduce prejudice, and enhance workplace productivity. For example, when a Caucasian person states to a person of color, "You talk ghetto," a microintervention to disarm this stereotype would be to interrupt and redirect the person making the statement by saying, "I find this statement untrue, offensive, and hurtful" (Sue et al., 2019). Empirical evidence shows that microinterventions are a powerful tool for facilitating behavioral change. For example, when Caucasians believe all African American people live on the "black side of town," challenge the stereotype by asking clarifying questions (Sue et al., 2019). Microinterventions offer a promising approach to facilitating behavioral change at the individual level. By understanding the foundations and mechanisms underlining microinterventions, researchers and practitioners can harness their potential to address complex social challenges and implement the change that we desire to see within our communities.

Ethical consideration and research are essential, as the practical implications of microinterventions hold great promise for fostering positive change in individuals' lives. The impact of racial battle fatigue on African American women in leadership positions highlights the need for effective interventions to counter its adverse effects. The limitations and challenges associated with microinterventions are also discussed, along with coping strategies for managing stress related to racial discrimination and microaggressions. In conclusion, this chapter underscores the pervasive nature of microaggressions and their detrimental impact on individuals' well-being and sense of belonging.

### **Summary and Connection to Self-Study**

The shield shown in Figure 2 represents my accomplishments and my challenges. It remains a constant companion in my many endeavors, but the new materials used to reconstruct it have made it much easier to carry. The updated shield now features an image of me carrying a torch that emits bright beams of light that symbolize bravery, setting boundaries, navigating non-inclusive environments, overcoming microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue. This powerful image represents the struggles that some African American women face in leadership roles and how they can succeed while staying true to their beliefs without compromising them. The torch also serves as a symbol of resilience in the face of adversity, demonstrating the ability to move forward while still protecting oneself from all the challenges of being a leader in educational institutions.

Figure 2

*The Weight of The Shield*

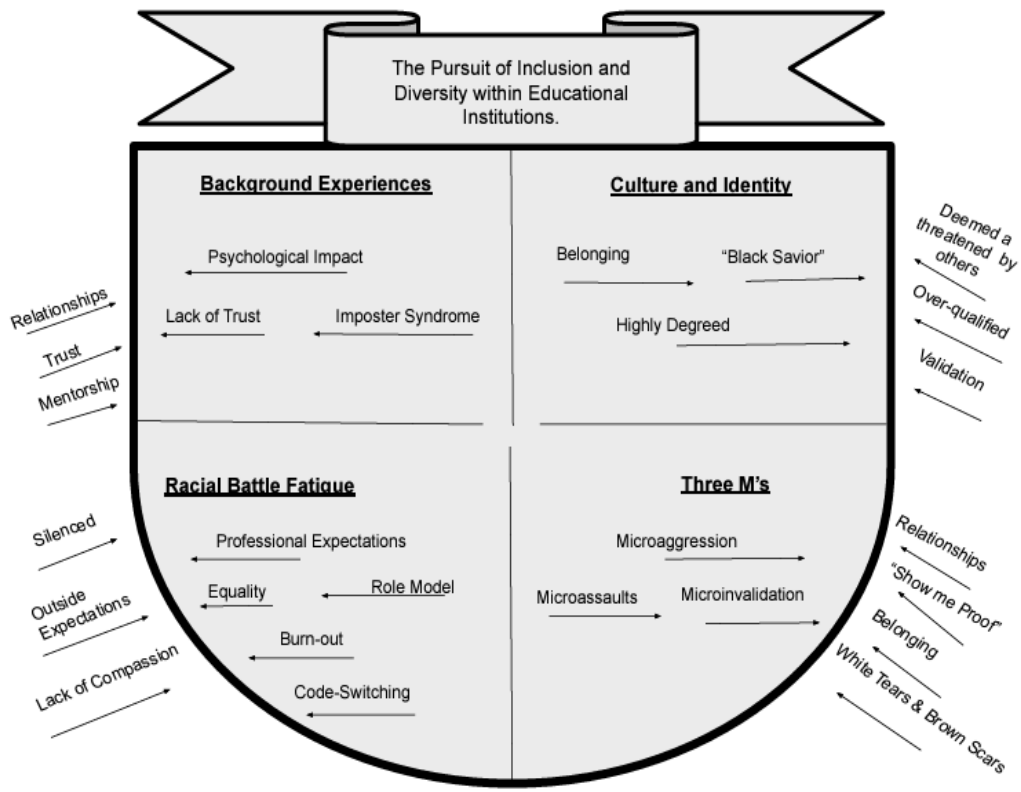


Figure 3

*Ranesa and The Shield*

By doing so, the shield, along with the torch, helps to safeguard my reputation as a leader and my ability to bounce back from any difficulties that may arise. The torch also represents resilience in the face of adversity and the ability to move forward while protecting oneself in all educational institutions. In this dissertation, I explore the effects of culture and identity, racial battle fatigue, microaggressions, and microinterventions that affected me as a leader in non-inclusive educational institutions. A society in which diversity within educational institutions influences the daily decision-making processes that shape our lives, educational

systems, and work is crucial for creating learning and work spaces where African American women's lives and work experiences matter.

As such, this study aims to advance ways to improve inclusivity and diversity, identify how culture and identity shaped my work experiences as an African American woman, discuss the impact of racial battle fatigue, and identify microaggressions and ways to intervene by implementing microinterventions. Acknowledging and embracing diverse identities, ensuring psychological safety, safeguarding individuals' freedom of expression, and eliminating microaggressions are essential steps to create an environment where racial battle fatigue no longer dominates educational institutions.

*“You are already equipped with the ability to make a difference.”*  
-Jennifer Brown

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

In this chapter, I explored my research question: *“How do I experience and respond racial bias in the workplace?”* This inquiry was not just academic; it was deeply personal, rooted in my lived experience as an African American woman and leader navigating the complexities of workplace dynamics. The focus of chapter three was my journey toward understanding and addressing culture and identity, archetypes of African American women, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue. This research was challenging and transformative.

The purpose of this research is to shed light on how I encountered, internalized and responded to racial bias throughout my career. As an African American woman and leader, my pursuit of workplace inclusion and diversity was a central theme in my professional life. The study sought to unpack the strategies and processes I employed to enhance my cultural awareness and understanding, to foster an environment that supported inclusivity for all, particularly in increasingly diverse educational settings.

Through a self-reflective lens, I examined how my experiences and responses to racial bias shaped my leadership approach and my efforts to promote diversity and inclusion. The significance of this study contributed to a broader discussion on improving inclusivity in educational institutions, offering insights that informed forward-thinking, collaborative strategies for success in today’s diverse and ever-evolving world. To guide this research, I utilized the four characteristics of self-study as described by Samaras and Freese (2006) below, which provided a framework for analyzing and understanding the complexities of my experiences with racial bias in the workplace.

This self-study was situational because it was an inquiry into the experiences, challenges, and struggles of my working environments as an African American administrator and educator throughout my career. Samaras and Freese (2006) explained the four characteristics of a self-study as:

1. Self-study is a process because I seek to shift from self-blame and guilt to a cyclical journey that embraces discomfort and engages in “questioning, discovery, challenge, hope and change” (p. 43).
2. Self-study is knowledge because I am seeking to understand patterns in your experiences with racial bias in the workplace.
3. Self-study is paradoxical because education claims to desire diversity in leadership, but my experience is racial bias and a lack of inclusivity.

This chapter, therefore, served as a critical reflection on my ongoing journey toward becoming a more inclusive and culturally responsive leader while influencing others to do the same. The self-study methodology aligned with questions and experiences from my childhood to adulthood. After grappling with the challenges and questions surrounding diversity and inclusion, I inquired more deeply into why inclusion and diversity mattered.

### **Rationale for the Study**

A qualitative design best answers the research question: How do I experience and respond racial bias in the workplace? For this qualitative research study, meaning is understood through subjectivism. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define qualitative research as “studying things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (p.15). In qualitative research, it is essential to identify a particular issue worthy of study, and we must choose a topic of interest. For this study, I choose

to examine the sense I have made and the meaning I attributed to my experiences as an African American woman, as a leader in an educational setting with a focus on the ways I identified, interpreted, and responded to racial bias in the workplace.

Freeman and Muhammad defined perception as “one’s situational and historical orientation to meaning, and is, therefore, entangled in all aspects of the research process” (Freeman & Muhammad, 2023). For this study, that meant that the collective culture, personal identities, and histories of myself as an African American woman were essential. Critical theory, as the paradigm grounding my work, was at the core of the essential inquiry to challenge, transform, and analyze power relations that tend to focus on the analysis of social class (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This was appropriate for my study because I sought to explore the ways that I identified and create safe spaces within the hierarchical systems, both within education and society itself.

Furthermore, Bhattacharya (2017) noted that critical theories examined “the role of the social structures of oppression playing out through the lived experiences of people” (p. 74). Thus, critical theory was relevant to my work because I examined my lived experiences as an African American woman in a leadership role.

### **Data Collection**

Data collected during my research explored identity & culture, the archetypes of African American woman, racial battle fatigue, and microaggressions. Collecting data, encompassed various components including my journey of past and present experiences that concentrated on these topics. Moreover, the research involved the maintenance of weekly journals to record my thoughts and experiences related to cultural and identity, archetypes of African American women, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue. The primary objective of my research

project was to raise awareness and foster a better understanding of cultural and identity, archetypes of African American women, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue with the ultimate goal of creating a more inclusive and fair society. As a researcher and participant, I wrote journal entries that reflected my thoughts and experiences regarding culture and identity, archetypes of African American women, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue throughout the project.

### **Data Collection Method**

The data collected was carried out using a variety of methods including journaling, self-assessment tools, and interviews. The various stages of the data collection process were documented via journal writings, capturing memories, feelings, and reflections - both positive and negative - throughout the study. These journal entries provided a rich narrative of the research experience, allowing me to document my immediate thoughts and reflections. Data collection consisted of weekly journaling, reflecting on my own experiences with culture and identity, archetypes of African American women, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue. Self-reflection on my journey allowed me to gain valuable insight into my own beliefs, motivations, and behavioral patterns, ultimately facilitating awareness and transformation.

### **Data Collection Process**

The data collection process was performed through coding analysis. I relied on Saldana's (2009) *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, which describes the coding analysis technique in detail. The data collected in my self-study served as the foundation for self-analysis and self-reflection, providing a deeper understanding of myself and offering opportunities for meaningful growth. The tools that I used to collect data include reflection from my professional journal entries and illustration depicted on my shield.

In Table 1, I listed the schools I worked for, along with my role and my general impression of the level of inclusivity as well as the lack of inclusion in each institution. These educational institutions consisted of demographics that included a high percentage of students from low-income families that received Title 1 federal funding to meet the educational needs of these students. Because of the relevancies of my career path, only the last two schools were discussed in this study as they are the most current. As reflection were not a linear process, I arranged my entries into chronological order as needed. The school names used in this research are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual schools is purely coincidental. To protect the privacy and identities of individuals, including colleagues, administrators, and others involved, all names have been altered. Additionally, certain journal entries have not been included due to the sensitive nature of their content.

Table 1  
*Chronological Timeline of Professional Roles*

This space was left blank intentionally.	Chronological List of Workplaces and Roles Served	General Feeling of Inclusivity or Non-inclusivity	Title School
A.P.K. Sites (Activating Prior Knowledge)	1. London Hill Elementary: Teacher	Inclusivity	Title I School
	2. Sunnyside Elementary: Teacher	Inclusivity	Title I School
	3. Davis Elementary: Asst. Principal	Non-inclusive	N/A
Site 1	4. Nathan Forrest H.S.: Asst. Principal	Non-inclusive	N/A
Site 2	5. Hillside M.S.: Asst. Principal	Non-inclusive	N/A
Site 3	6. Hale Elementary: Principal	Non-inclusive	N/A

For Hillside Middle School and Hale Elementary School, I documented my journey as an educational leader and administrator. I began with one introductory journal, followed by three additional journals for each site. These journals included the following information:

1. Context of the workplace.
2. People who were mentors, helpers, antagonists, or other important players in my story.
3. General feelings or emotions that arose when I reflected on being in these spaces.

As I reflected on my previous experiences as an educational leader and administrator, the illustrations of the shield changed. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate the profound effects on non-inclusive work environments, drawing on background experiences to highlight the weight of unsafety, the intersection of culture and identity, and the ongoing impact of microaggressions.

Figure 1  
*Changes to The Weight of the Shield*

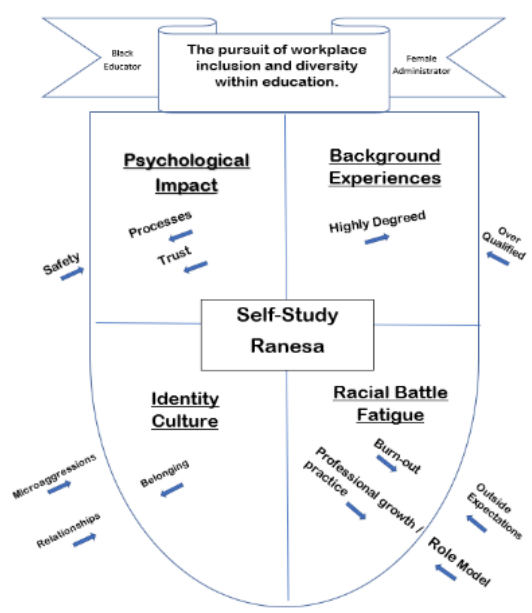
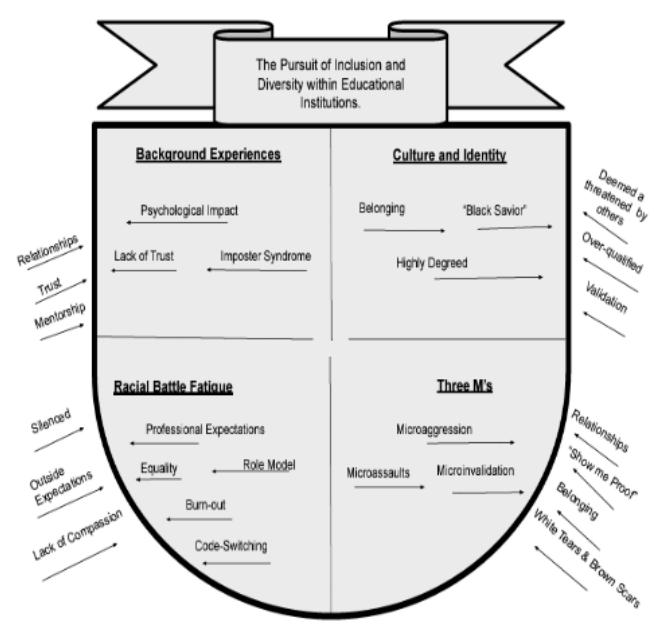


Figure 2  
*Changes to The Weight of the Shield 2*



Next, I completed an in-depth experiential chronological account of my final two workplaces in the chart above, consisting of multiple journal entries that illuminate my experiences as an African American educator and administrator. These chronological accounts

focused on moments of inclusivity, non-inclusivity, and racial bias that led to my eventual departure.

Data collection was conducted in accordance with the process. After initial data collection and coding, I engaged in a process of "shielding," where I revisited and reflected on the collected data. This step involved critical self-reflection and redevelopment of research strategies based on emerging insights, as I wrote memos of memories, feelings, etc. both positive and negative. The Shield (Figures 1 and 3) was modified, redeveloped, and reflected as needed.

In the following steps, I extended these critical discussions to my Critical Friend Group. These steps focused on collecting data information from lived experiences described in my journals. Various schools had different reflections, such as Forrest High School, Hillside Middle School, and Hale Elementary School. I collected data in cycles, and there were three cycles of journaling and reflections. I began with journal reflections first, followed by data collection cycles. As a next step, journal reflections were coded to emphasize experiences and emotions, such as, "How did that make me feel?", followed by shield reflections. After which, discussions with my Critical Friend Group ensued. Following the collection of journals, coding, shield reflections, and discussion with the Critical Friend Group, I drafted an analytical memo of memories, feelings, and experiences, both positive and negative.

Applying this process involved identifying reoccurring themes, significant moments, and key ideas that emerged from the data. The analysis process was carried out with a reflective stance, acknowledging biases and preconceptions that affected the interpretation of the process while taking into consideration those biases and preconceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study's found details to helped me understand the self-study data and its implications for personal

development and growth. Initial results included how I described and understood cultural identity and made sense of the impact of exploring the workplace's climate.

To capture the data in these journals, I used audio-record myself as I reflect on my journey as an educator and administrator. Those recordings were uploaded to otter.ai for initial transcription. After each recording, I listen to the recordings and correct any errors in the transcription.

### **Data Analysis**

When analyzing the data collected during a self-study, there must be a deliberate and systematic process of explaining the gathered insights and patterns in order to uncover patterns and themes. This involved identifying reoccurring themes, significant moments, or key ideas that emerge from the data. The analysis process was carried out with a reflective stance, acknowledging biases and preconceptions that affected the interpretation of the process and considering those biases and preconceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, the findings of this study provided a detailed understanding of the self-study data as well as its implications for personal development and growth. The initial results revealed how the researcher (Ranesa) and collaborators (CFG) conversed about their cultural identities and understood the impact of exploring these identities on our workplace climates.

### **Process Coding**

A procedure known as emotion coding and versus coding was applied to procure these results. Saldana (2013) described emotion coding as the process by which the researcher labels the emotions the participant recalls and/or experiences. Saldana (2013) goes on to explain Versus coding as terms that are in direct conflict with each other. Saldana also stated, "Since emotions are a universal human experience, our acknowledgment of them in our research provides deep

insight into the participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions (p.108)". The Emotion Coding method clearly demonstrated why my journaling method was supported by this method.

The first round of coding focused on my emotions, such as happiness, surprise, fear, anger, disgust, and sadness. My second round of coding identified patterns of emotions and the actions I took in response to those emotions. For example, when I experience a microaggression, I feel disgusted, irritated, furious, and I pulled away from the people involved. I repeated the process from rounds one and two, consolidating the most frequently recurring emotion words from my experiences as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal, and charted these words for round three of coding. This allowed me to identify the common emotions. Finally, I employed three rounds of coding to connect and implement the framework needed to answer my research question: How do I experience and respond to racial bias in the workplace?

When analyzing my journal entries, it was important to code the process to help determine the connection between my experiences. The second coding process used was Versus Coding. Saldana explained Versus Coding as terms that are in direct conflict with each. For the process of the research, it was appropriate for me to use both processes because the first set of codes analyzed conflicts and microaggression while the second described how I felt during these lived experiences (Saldana, 2016).

During the data analysis phase, discussions and feedback sessions were conducted using digital platforms such as Zoom, Otter.AI, and Google Meets. These sources provided an alternative space for sharing perspectives and to stimulate deeper thinking as I engaged in data collection and analysis while supporting my study's findings. The reflective journals emphasized both the positive aspects and the challenges I encountered.

### **Critical Friend Group**

In 2017, Janette Blake and Alaster Gibson summarized critical friend groups (CFG) as a safe space for educators to discuss the status of their work and outcomes, challenge assumptions, and building trusting relationships relevant to their lived experiences (Blake & Gibson, 2021). The Critical Friend Group (CFG) revolved around perceptions and experiences of African American women. I relied heavily on my Critical Friend Group (CFG) to collect reliable, valid, and rich data for my research. The role of the CFG was to act as strategic thought partners and facilitate collaborative conversation and calibration.

The selection process for the CFG involved identifying African American women who held bachelor's degrees or advanced degrees, such as master's or doctoral degrees. Participating participants were employed or had been employed in educational institutions and or were in a leadership role at their workplace or held a license to serve in a leadership capacity. This criterion led to the selection of (1) African American school counselor, (1) African American elementary educator, (1) African American administrator, and (1) African American professional leader, who are all women.

### **Critical Friend Group Feedback and Reflection Integration**

After journaling and logging entries for each site, I held a session with the Critical Friend Group (CFG) to discuss entries from Hillside Middle Schools and Hale Elementary. Reflective conversation lasted for 30 to 45 minutes to reflect on my experience and discuss my learning up to that point. CFG discussions and feedback sessions were collected using recordings through Otter.Ai and conversations were held virtually through Google Meets. This source provided alternative perspectives and stimulated deeper thinking as I engaged in data collection and

analyzed data to support the study's findings. The notes from the meeting assisted me in emphasizing both the positive aspects and the challenges I encountered.

Through these discussions, I identified patterns and shared my overall feelings of inclusivity or the lack of inclusivity at the site, followed by identifying the emotions I felt, and third the actions I took in response to the emotions.

In addition to sharing my thinking, CFG members were asked to share if they had similar stories.

In the chart below, the following questions were asked and pre-scripted to ensure all members, were asked the same questions:

1. Can you share your general impressions of the journal entries?
2. What stood out to you the most about this journal entry?
3. Were there any themes or topics that you found especially meaningful or thought-provoking?
4. How did my reflections on [specific experience or event described in the journal] resonate with you?
5. Do you remember experiencing a similar inclusivity or lack of inclusivity as an African American educator, leader, or administrator?
6. What emotional response did this journal entry provoke?
7. What actions do you remember taking or thoughts do you remember having?
8. What does reflecting on this moment tell you about being an African American educator, leader, or administrator?

At the conclusion of each dialogue and reflection session with my critical friend group, I reflected in private. I revisited the shield in light of our meeting and thought about the issues of culture and identity, archetypes of African American women, microaggression, racial battle

fatigue, that I have faced in educational institutions. I then implement feedback from the CFG discussions to reflect on the shield, reanalyze the image of the shield, and determine if the shield would take on a new identity. An overview of the critical friend meetings is included in the chart below.

Table 2

*Critical Friend Group (CFG) Meetings*

	Meeting Length	CFG Members Present
Meeting 1- August 18th	30 minutes for each participant. Total of two hours.	There were four CFG members present. Due to the emotional triggers, one participant choose not to continue with the study.
Meeting 2- August 25th	30 minutes for each participant. Total of 90 minutes.	Three members were present.
Meeting 3- September 1st	30 minutes for each participant. Total of 90 minutes.	Three members were present.

**Critical Friends Demographics**

The Critical Friends Groups (CFG) was composed of four women, ranging in age from 35 to 60 years old. All members identified as African American women. The group included individuals with diverse marital statuses: married, single, and widowed. Each participant held a master's degree, and three of the four members also held doctoral degrees. Two of the women were still employed in the field of education, while the others two had transitioned to different career opportunities outside of education. CFG members were selected based on their race, gender, and educational experiences, ensuring a diverse and insightful perspective. Each member served as a strategic thought partner and collaborative calibrate for the site evaluation and journal

reflections. Below are brief descriptions of each participant, offering professional insights into their educational journey and highlighting their contributions as critical friends.

**Critical Friend #1** was formerly a classroom teacher in a secondary school with over ten years of experience. She was promoted to the position of school administrator, which is an important responsibility. From the point of view of a teacher to the point of an administrator, her perspective has changed dramatically.

**Critical Friend #2** worked as a classroom teacher. As part of her career path, she expanded her role within the school by becoming an Art Teacher. Due to the perceived struggles as an African American teacher and a lack of support from administrators and her peers, she decided to change careers. She now works as a human resource manager for the public sector.

**Critical Friend #3** has been a school counselor who also obtained her administrator license. Her current roles include serving as school counselor and administrator designate. She shifted from serving in a rural district with minimal African American teachers and administrators to an urban district with more African American teachers and administrators. She is currently employed in the education field.

**Critical Friend #4** has served both on the collegiate and professional levels. She has served as a faculty member to a diverse group of adult learners over the years, as well as sharing her perspective as an African American leader of the private sector.

During my research, my Critical Friend Group (CFG) was an invaluable source of support, insight, and constructive critique. The group was comprised of dedicated professionals who shared a passion for education. As I discussed my experiences and initial reflections, CFG members were expected to challenge my assumptions, identify microaggressions as either real or perceived, and discuss evidence of Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF). In our first meeting, one critical

friend questioned whether I was too emotional in my reaction to a teacher putting her knuckles in her fist when asked to close her laptop. After we debated on whether the same result would have occurred if the races were reversed, we came to the conclusion that my response was not overly emotional. The CFG was not critical because of my lived experiences but critical because I have become numb to unprofessionalism as a normalized behavior.

Additionally, a critical friend also felt that an educational peer should have stood up and said something to the teacher. They felt that it was not my role to remind a professional of appropriate behavior. In this way, my critical friends were not "doubting" my story but instead pointing out ways where I was perhaps not aware enough of the bias I lived with daily. My CFG provided diverse perspectives that enriched my analysis and deepened my understanding of complex issues related to culture and identity, archetypes of African American women, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue.

### **Overviews and journal discussions for Critical Friends Group**

In my journey with the Critical Friend Group (CFG), I focused on journal entries from Hillside Middle School and Hale Elementary due to their profound significance in my personal and professional life. These particular entries resonated deeply as they allowed me to explore the concept of role reversal, critically examining the challenges I faced as an African American woman and a leadership position with authority and supervisory responsibilities. Sharing these entries provided a valuable opportunity to dissect my experiences and gains from the group on the intersection of race, gender, and leadership in my career.

My first round of CFG conversations began with a virtual meeting invitation, setting the stage for thoughtful and reflective discussion. Before the meeting, I asked each participant to read a journal entry from my experience as an administrator at Hillside Middle School and Hale

Elementary. These entries served as a springboard for our discussions, enabling us to explore shared experiences and established a strong foundation for our collaborative efforts. As we proceeded, I also shared brief overviews of each participant's career background, highlighting the depth of expertise and insight they brought to the process. Their honest feedback was instrumental in refining my ideas and ensuring the rigor and relevance of my dissertation. Through our conversations, we fostered a space of mutual respect and intellectual growth, making this academic endeavor a truly transformative experience.

During our discussions, I aimed to explore whether the outcomes I faced would have been different if the roles were reversed. All four participants concluded that if the situation had been reversed, I would have likely been suspended or fired. They also agreed that such aggressive behavior would not have been tolerated from an African American teacher towards a Caucasian administrator, regardless of gender. What stood out to me during these conversations was the participants reactions. They were shocked by the specifics of my experiences but not surprised that I had encountered such aggression. One participant even questioned why a peer or another teacher did not intervene to correct the teacher who acted aggressively toward me. The consensus among the group was clear: if the roles had been reversed, the teachers should have been fired. Another participant asked where my support from district personnel during this incident was, highlighting the lack of institutional backing I faced.

As I engaged with my CFG, I noticed that one participant was particularly triggered by the conversation, as it brought up painful memories of similar situations she had endured in the school system. Although she remained professional, her facial expression revealed the deep emotional impact this discussion had on her, reflecting the shared trauma many African American women face in educational leadership roles. After the discussion, I asked this

participant if she would like to continue as a participant in this discussion, and she decided not to proceed.

This experience reinforced the value of my research, as it highlighted these lived experiences were not isolated incidents. While I was the one encountering microaggressions at this specific site, members of the CFG were facing similar challenges and different schools and districts. Their shared experiences emphasize the systematic nature of the issues and the need for continued exploration and documentation. I chose to share this particular story because it allowed me to perform a role reversal, offering a unique perspective on the dynamics of power, race, and gender in educational settings.

Hillside Middle School and Hale Elementary were not inclusive work environments, with only three African American women in the entire middle school and less than six at Hale Elementary. In those moments, I felt alone, isolated, and without a trusted peer to confide in. My professional concerns, especially related to the racial dynamics, were often dismissed or minimized, leaving me feeling that my experiences were being gaslighted as overreactions. The actions I took during these moments were often rooted in a deep sense of numbness and frustration. I felt that no one cared that I did not belong in the school or district, and that I was being rejected simply for doing my job as an African American woman in leadership. The experience of racial bias in the workplace was something I internalized, often experiencing anxiety attacks before and after school, lack of eating and sleeping, while experiencing other condition caused by constant microaggressions and racial battle fatigue. This constant battle made me dread going to work, and I began to question whether this was a widespread issue in all learning environments or just in the district where I served.

Throughout the CFG of conversations, I reflected on the microaggressions I faced: being labeled as too sensitive or too emotional, racial battle fatigue, microinsults. These experiences took a toll on my physical and mental health. The weight of racial battle fatigue, experiencing daily microaggression, and constantly monitoring my culture and identity became unbearable. Each quadrant reflected different aspects of my lived experience from burnout and psychological impact to a lack of trust and a diminished sense of belonging. As I analyzed the shield that was meant to protect me, it instead became a burden symbolizing the immense challenges I faced every day in my role. Once the CFG conversations were concluded, I begin to categorize the journal entries by process coding.

### **Collection Process**

Data collection began in two processes. The first process began with emotional coding. After analyzing journal entries and conversing with the CFG group, I went through each journal entry and identified emotional words from each journal. Each emotional word identified was placed into an Excel sheet. The journal entries identified 100 to 120 emotional words in total. After all emotional words were identified, words were then grouped by the amount of times that they appeared. Next, the emotional words were assigned a chronological number to identify the number of times the word appeared and color-coded to help categorize the words into smaller groups.

From there, words were categorized by similar meanings and definitions. Lastly, once words were grouped by meaning and similarities, words were then end placed into three themes. The theme that arose from the emotional coding were frustration, hyper vigilance, and empowerment. The second process for collecting the data was the implementation of versus Cody. There was a total of 11 journal entries from Sunnyside Elementary, hillside middle school,

and hail elementary. each journal entry was analyzed by the method of verses. Each journal entry's theme centralized me versus an overview of the journal entry. After analyzing each journal entry an overview of the journal entry received a theme. Once each theme was analyzed, I was able to pull out the central theme from the journal entry. There was a total of three main commonalities from each versus theme: Ranesa vs. Social Inequalities, Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions, and Ranesa vs Ranesa. Although there were several journal entries to recall my lived experiences, here are two examples of Versus and Emotion Coding.

The first example of Emotion Coding and Versus was described during a hostile act of aggression displayed by a teacher when given a directive by me, I recalled, "*When I asked the teacher to close her laptop during a presentation, she slammed computer screen shut, turned bright red, balled up her fist, started pounding her closed fist inside of her opposite hand, while locking eyes with me.*" This incident created a hostile and aggressive work environment. For this entry, the Versus Code was Ranesa vs. Teacher and the Emotion Code was a feeling of disrespect, anger, and concern.

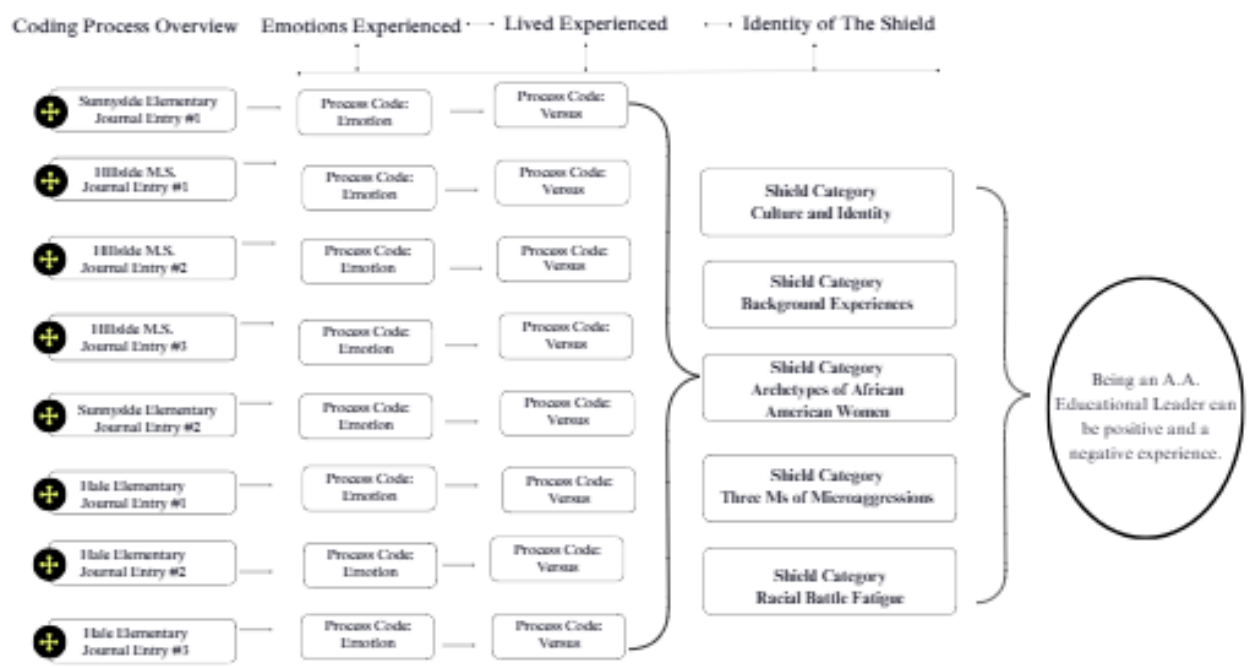
The second example of Versus and Emotion Coding was a journal entry about, two African American students who were misidentified regarding a student infraction on the school bus. I recalled, "*When my supervisor reviewed the footage, she prematurely concluded that I had not administered appropriate punishment, and despite having issued the correct punishment according to the Student Code of Conduct, my supervisor did not apologize for her mistake.*" This versus resulted in Ranesa vs. Societal Inequities, Ranesa vs. Educational Institution, and Ranesa vs. Ranesa. With the Emotion Codes of feeling attacked, frustrated, defensive. Versus and Emotion Coding connected my lived experiences through journal entries to my research question: How do I experience and respond to racial bias in the workplace?

The relationship between my research question and the findings will be shared in Chapter 4, where I will connect how my research question informed and shaped the outcomes of the study in greater detail.

In Figure four, the overview of the coding process describes journal entries, followed by emotions connected to lived experiences that connected to my lived experiences of The Shield and the four quadrants of The Shield.

Figure 4

*Coding Process*



## **Trustworthiness**

This self-study required a variety of approaches and considerations to maintain trustworthiness. Credibility, dependability, and transparency of the research process and the results of the research were essential aspects of trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

Credibility was one of the most critical factors in establishing trustworthiness. Shenton (2004) defined credibility as the validity in which readers will be able to test or measure what is intended by the researcher through multiple methods, such as examination of previous research findings, random sampling of individuals, and triangulation, just to name a few. To ensure credibility was addressed, I openly acknowledged my biases and sociocultural position. In this study, the CFG acted as a calibration, discussion, and accountability partner. I enhanced credibility by implementing a triangulation strategy using techniques such as observation from my journals and the CFG, which were primary data collection methods in qualitative research (Shelton, 2004). In accordance with the triangulation strategy, my research included triangulation through CFG, reflective journaling, and emotional coding.

### **Dependability**

Dependability centered around this single question, “If I were to use the same methods and with the same participants, would I achieve the same results?” I addressed dependability by reporting in detail my experiences as an African American woman working in inclusive and non-inclusive workspaces through guided journal entries, participant interviews, lived experiences, and peer review sessions as a part of transparency.

The method in which transparency was involved included a systematic and well-documented data collection method ensuring consistency and accuracy (Shenton, 2004). I clearly outlined my

research questions, methodology, and data collection strategies. As a part of my research process, I maintained a detailed record, which included any decisions, challenges, and changes made during the process (Shenton, 2004). Credibility, dependability, and transparency were achieved by utilizing analysis techniques and seeking alternative explanations for my findings. Using these standards, I was able to strengthen the validity and reliability of my self-study, contributing to its overall quality.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts or groups. This section defined and explored transferability. According to Drisko (2024), transferability is a process of abstraction that involves applying information gained from specific persons, settings, and eras to others that have not been directly studied. In qualitative research, it is a critical concept, since it allows the reader to determine if the findings are relevant to their own environment. The transferability of my research results was achieved by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and my lived experiences, as well as by using the journaling process. I documented my lived experiences through journaling, so that the findings of my research were meaningful and could be transferred to similar situations in the future. The transferability of my experience and research to other settings was appropriate because, based on my lived experiences and research into cultural and identity, archetypes of African American women, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue, I provided readers with a detailed description of my findings, enabling them to make informed decisions about the relevance to other contexts.

In my self-study research, I made use of strategies to establish trustworthiness by ensuring accurate and creditable data collection and analysis. I maintained dependability through

consistent and repeatable research methods, and I enhanced transferability by providing detailed contextual descriptions, enabling others to apply my finding to similar settings.

This dissertation investigates the various ways in which individuals internalize and respond to racial biases within educational institutes and workplaces. This study recognizes the significance of understanding how racial biases impact individuals at a personal and professional level. Exploration of the research question, *How do I experience and respond racial bias in the workplace?* offers valuable insight into the psychological and behavioral responses that individuals exhibit when facing microaggression, racial battle fatigue, and microinterventions. This study intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of how individuals internalize and respond to racial biases in educational institutions. The findings of this research will contribute to the development of strategies and interventions that promote inclusivity, culture, and diversity within educational institutes.

“Your willingness to look at your darkness is what empowers you to change.”  
-Iyanla Vanzant

### **Chapter Four: Findings**

For this chapter of my self-study, I explored my personal experiences that shaped my journey as an African American woman, educator, and leader. My self-study concentrated on the burdens, successes, and challenges I encountered while striving to overcome racial barriers in the workplace. This chapter will focus on five sections. In the first section, I will share the reconstruction of my original research question and how I one research question became two questions. In the second section, I will present how I responded to racial bias in the workplace. In the third section, I will explain how I experienced racial bias in the workplace. In section four, I will look across my experiences. Section five will be the overview and conclusion. The findings in this chapter will provide a deeper insight and expand on how I responded to and experienced racial bias. Later in this chapter, the connection between emotional and versus codes will be explored in greater detail. These lived experiences profoundly shaped my identity as an individual, educator, and leader, deepening my understanding and resilience on each role.

#### **Section One: New Research Question**

My original research question was: How do I experience and respond to racial bias in the workplace? After journaling, collecting and analyzing data, and participating in discussion with my CFG, my original question was restructured into two new questions: (1) How do I respond to racial bias in the workplace? (2) How did I experience racial bias in the workplace?

To understand how I responded to racial bias in the workplace, I organized my journal entries in chronological order according to the worksite. From there, I analyzed each journal entry, identified each emotion, how many times the word appeared, and inserted the emotion word into a table. Once I was able to narrow down emotional words based upon their meanings, I

assigned a number to the word indicating how many times the word appeared. I created a diagram to visually represent the emotions experienced during my different professional roles as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal categorizing them into positive and negative feelings. The diagram captures how these emotions, both empowering and challenging, influence a career change. The diagram (Figure 4) visually maps the emotions experienced during different professional roles as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Categorizing these roles into positive and negative feelings captured how these emotions, both empowering and challenging, influenced a career change.

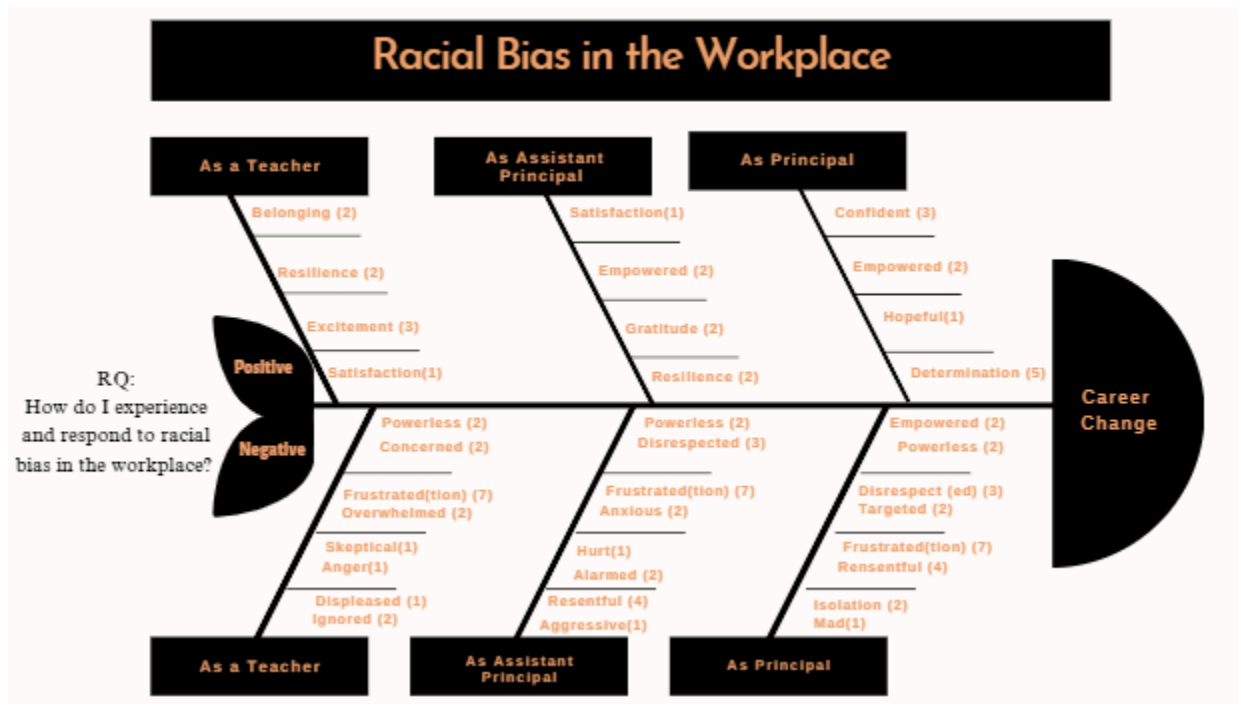
Key elements include:

- **Positive Emotions:** Words such as resilience, excitement, satisfaction, confidence, hope, determination, and empowerment, representing growth and motivation across different roles.
- **Negative Emotions:** Words like frustration, hurt, disrespect, powerlessness, resentment, and isolation, showing struggles experienced in various positions.
- The diagram links these emotions to career decisions and reflects on the response to racial bias in the workplace, specifically how emotions shaped resilience and the need for a career change.

This diagram organizes the experiences and emotional responses in a clear structure, distinguishing between the roles and highlighting the impact of both positive and negative feelings.

Figure 5

*How I Responded to Racial Bias in the Workplace*



## Section Two: Experiences of Racial Bias in the Workplace

The major themes that came to light based upon how I responded were Ranesa vs. Society, Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions, and Ranesa vs. Ranesa followed by three sub-themes. Figure 6, The diagram represents a framework called "Versus Coding" to explore how you experienced racial bias in various professional roles, such as teacher, assistant principal, and principal. The central theme is my career change, influenced by multiple internal and external conflicts,

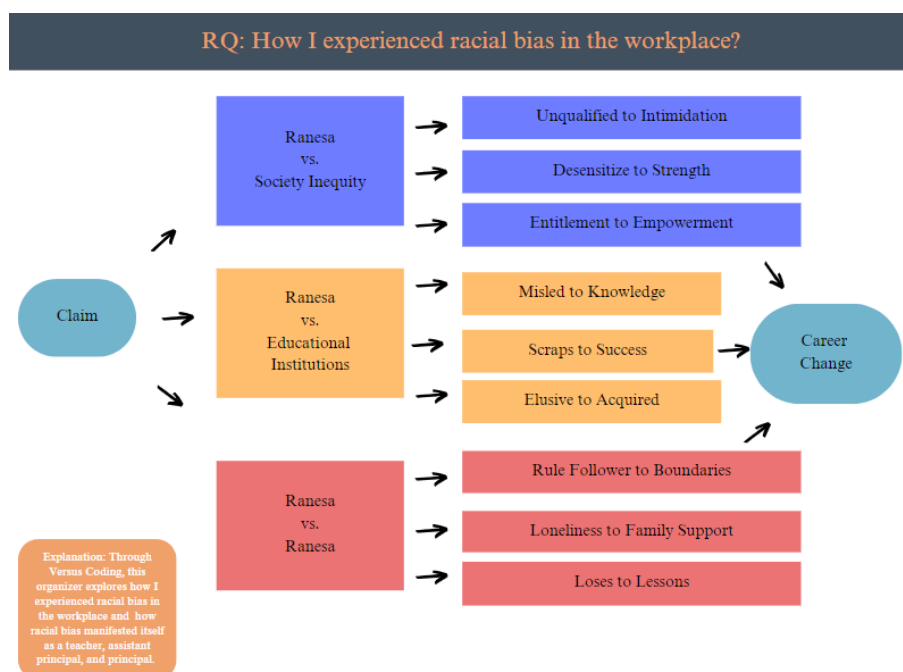
Figure 7  
How I Experienced Racial Bias in the Workplace

symbolized through a series of "Ranesa vs." categories.

Each "Ranesa vs." conflict contrasts a negative experience or emotion with a positive outcome or personal growth.

These include:

- **Unqualified to Intimidation:** Reflects how feelings of inadequacy transformed into a perception of intimidation by others.
- **Desensitize to Strength:** Shows how becoming desensitized evolved into a source of inner strength.
- **Entitlement to Empowerment:** Describes the shift from feeling entitled to becoming genuinely empowered.



- **Rule Follower to Boundaries:** Highlights how following rules led to the establishment of personal boundaries.
- **Loneliness to Family Support:** Illustrates a journey from isolation to finding support from family.
- **Loses to Lessons:** Transforms losses into learning opportunities.
- **Misled to Knowledge:** Indicates how being misled turned into a quest for truth and knowledge.
- **Scraps to Success:** Reflects the transition from minimal resources to achieving success.
- **Elusive to Acquired:** Captures how elusive information was ultimately acquired through effort.

### **Ranesa vs. Society Inequity**

By analyzing how I responded to racial bias in the workplace, I have gained a better understanding of my reactions towards these biases. Ranesa vs. Society Inequity was the first theme of the three major themes I used to expose my lived experiences with racial bias in the workplace. The larger theme of Ranesa vs. Society Inequity sheds light on three sub-themes: Unqualified to Intimidation, Desensitized to Strengths, and Entitlement to Empowerment. Each of these sub themes stemmed from the societal stereotypes and biases that I, as an African American woman in leadership, encounter. For this research, I defined Ranesa vs. Society Inequities as acts of nonchalance bigotry, conscious bias, and without the need to care for or demonstrate empathy towards a marginalized group of people.

As already discussed, I will use italics to highlight my experiences as I tell stories from the past to convey my voice to the reader and help them understand it. My stories were meant to bridge my experiences to the methodology and framework. My journal entries sought to strike a

balance between my lived experiences and conversation with members of my CFG. A classic of Ranesa vs. Systemic Inequity comes from my journal entry from Sunnyside Elementary. I recall a time when I experienced systemic inequity there, which reminded me of the disrespect I felt. The reason for my transfer seemed like a silent but very loud power play by upper leadership. During a conversation with my Critical Friends Group (CFG), I shared the following excerpt from my journal recalling a time as an Assistant Principal at Sunnyside Elementary. During the conversation, I remember a moment from my journal when, a conversation regarding pending transfer to another location took a turn for the worst, a part of my conversation with a member of leadership when as followed, *“Is thus transfer because I reported what happened in the class discussion in Mr. Wallace’s class? You know when he shared the story about games he would play as a child after church. When he and his friends would play a game called N-word on the sidewalk? to call a room full of students.” He assured me it wasn’t, but it still felt like more than just a coincidence. But as a Black woman, I knew better. I knew this transfer was retaliation. I had reported a racial slur being used in a classroom full of African American students, and this was their way of sending me a subtle but clear message: stay in your place. But as a Black woman, I knew better. I knew this transfer was retaliation. I had reported a racial slur being used in a classroom full of African American students, and this was their way of sending me a subtle but clear message: stay in your place.*

This moment was not met with compassion nor empathy but more less by how the impact of this situation affected me as African American women in a leadership in a predominantly white school. During and after this incident, I did not feel a sense of belonging nor psychological safety. This moment contributed to additional emotional suppression, resentment, and frustration.

Instances, such as these contributed to me evaluating my career choice, atmosphere, and decision to seek allyship in another career field.

Three sub-themes that generated from Ranesa vs. Society Inequities were, Unqualified to Intimidation, Desensitized to Strength, and Entitlement to Empowerment. Each sub-theme is meant to convey how a negated lived experience was embraced and reversed to equip me for personal growth and professional strength to overcome Society Inequities by not conforming to stereotypes or archetypes about African American women in leadership. The first sub-theme, Unqualified to Intimidation, illustrates how society often deemed me unqualified as a teacher or administrator based on my physical traits, culture, and identity. I had to constantly prove my knowledge through the studying of policies, reviewing actionable practices through professional developments, consulting with trusted colleagues, acquiring new skills, on the job trainings, and advanced degrees, it led to unknowingly intimidating others.

I grew to understand and created a self-definition for intimidation as the unintended formulation of self-doubt in others due to my physical traits, tenacity, educational levels, negative and positive lived experiences and skill set, which inadvertently exposes their insecurities without malicious intent. An example of Unqualified to Intimidation, would be from a previously told story as the head principal at Hale Elementary, *when, I gained the keys to the building, obtaining the necessary clearances to be inside the building, and beginning the process of moving into my new space when I was stopped by what seemed to be a curious employee. Despite wearing a badge, the employee questioned who I was and what I was doing. I had a cart of materials that could have been mistaken as trash, and when I sarcastically answered that I was the new janitor, the employee seemed to be relieved. But it wasn't until the introduction went out enterprise wide that I was a new administrator, that the problems began.* These reflections

and many others lived experiences were plagued with assumptions harvested by microaggressions and archetypes of African American women. During these moments of Unqualified to Intimidation, I felt ignored, angry, disrespected, and I sense of dread because when the employees felt that I was “beneath them” and I did not pose a threat, they were okay and relieved.

The second sub-theme, Desensitized to Strength, highlights how some African American women are abandoned and isolated in biased work environments. It is often unsafe to express emotions when dealing with workplace bias. One interpretation for an example of Desensitized to Strength, was when I recounted a time from my journal when I was an assistant principal at Hillside Middle School. I recalled, *“The blatant disrespect from white teachers was ever-present and at an all-time high. During a professional development, conducted by an outside company, teachers from a particular grade were asked to attend during their Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). As the facilitator who happened to be an African American woman facilitated, I noticed all the white teachers had their laptops out, ignoring the facilitator and the presentation. It was rude and unprofessional, so I approached them, asking politely for them to close their laptops and pay attention. I asked each of them one by one, hey, can you close your laptop and put that away while we’re doing this professional development?”* While many complied, one teacher became very combative when she aggressively slammed her laptop shut, balled up her fist, and began hitting it into her opposite hand, almost as if she was ready to fight me. I checked myself! I thought, *is she really doing this?* I started nodding my head at her communicating in a non-verbal way letting her see that I was willing to lose it all if she thought she could harm me in any way. Her behavior was blatantly disrespectful—a threat of violence simply because I’d asked her to be professional. The lack of professionalism and decorum,

evoked bitterness, frustration, resentment and a lack of trust. Because I knew as an African American woman, whether I was a teacher or administrator, this behavior would not be tolerated if the shoe was on the other foot. I knew I would have been placed on administrative leave without pay, disciplined, and dismissed from my job if I had acted in this manner towards a teacher or leader. Moments such as these lead to me desensitizing my emotions and feeling at while at these school because I know I was not protected. Though stifling, these moments led me to a place of strength. Each impactful experience reinforced my integrity and resilience.

The third sub-theme, Entitlement to Empowerment, captured the theme of increased levels of disrespect and hostility toward me as teacher and administrator to empowering myself to stay in the field of education or making a decision to seek other career options. I am going to point out an event recorded in my journal entry as a teacher at Sunnyside Elementary. The exchange went like this, *“After my principal informed me that I was going to teach a 1<sup>st</sup> grade, I remember walking past a group of teachers that were huddled in a circle, praying, and they were crying. And as I looked up the hallway, I realized it was the first-grade teachers, and at this time, they were praying that I was not going to be put on their team, and they were praying that I would not become a first-grade teacher, and it was the most hurtful prayer I had ever heard in my life. At this time, I was not angry, but I was very saddened. I felt very empty and isolated. It felt as though, once again, I had worked hard for two years to become this, accomplish a teacher and to start putting my name out there only for people to embarrass me and feel threatened by me. It was hurtful to hear this, and I reported back to my classroom and to see this, it was like somebody had really punched me in my stomach. I had worked so hard to be a positive person, and let's be honest, to stay out of the teacher's lounge, where all the gossip and backbiting takes place. I had made a conscious decision to really pour a lot into my character, team building and*

*my leadership development, only to see this group of teachers huddled saddened that the news that I was coming to first grade.*” Situations like these desensitized my feelings and turned off emotions of being accepted or having a professional community to belong to. Circumstances such as these supported my views and emotions of betrayal, belonging, allyship, and mistrust. However, in these moments, emotions that prevailed were empowerment, a desire to win, and determination. In addition to what was previously mentioned, I was aware that microaggression and bias were deeply rooted in the school system and other educational institutions. Because of the instances, a perspective took shape as *Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions*.

### **Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions**

*Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions* was the second major theme I used to analyze my lived experiences with racial bias in the workplace. This versus code implied that there were more barriers knowingly placed in my path for success rather than alighting them. However, misleading information only increased my knowledge and resilience to strive harder to meet my personal goals. The larger theme of *Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions* shed light on three sub-themes: *Misled to Knowledge*, *Scraps to Success*, and *Elusive to Acquired*. Each of these sub themes stems from the educational institutions, where I have obtained employment or formal or informal education.

*Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions* was evident by racial barriers that were placed in my daily experiences as an African American woman in a leadership role. I recall one particular school district where I served as an administrator, this situation would present the perfect storm at Hillside Middle School. As racial tension between student erupted into a group of white and black students allegedly fighting due to race, parents within this school district, pointed out the school did not adequately hire or retain African Americans. Parents demanded representation for

their children! This brought back a time as an administrator, when I wrote a journal entry about being a “new hire”. To offer context, after applying and accepting the role as one of the new administrators at this school, I quickly learned racial bias and disparities were very present when, *“I remember a black student coming to talk to me to pretty much give me an orientation of the unwritten rules to the school, the school, the student at the time, had notified me that there was a redneck hallway and had advised me not to walk down this hallway. So, I let this information sit with me for about 48 hours, and the next day at school, I wanted to test the theory. And sure enough, as I walked down this hallway, I heard students making monkey noises and monkey sounds directed at me, as I was the only African American person walking down this hallway. And in that moment, I thought, “How brave of these students to make these disgusting noises and animal sound noises toward me - a highly qualified, certified educator and administrator and assistant principal”.* There was another instance when, “I was labeled the “black assistant principal.” Instead of labeling me as the “black assistant principal”, I feel I should have been described as a “woman” and providing a description of my attire that was wore. In another journal entry, I wrote about a conversation between an assistant principal and the Student Resource Officer (SRO), this discussion proceeded like this, *“right outside of my office door, another assistant principal, and the SRO at this time were talking about the “new black principal. I could hear that they did not reference me as Miss Shipman, the new assistant principal, with experience, but both the assistant principal and SRO made a predetermination that I would serve all the black students.”* Instances such as these sent a clear message that I was not a peer or colleague but powerless administrator wearing the title only. As an educator and administrator, this conversation caused a strong emotion of anger and frustration, but as an

African American woman who had overcome similar situations, it also created a hostile work where I dreaded going to work every day.

Building on this theme, the versus code Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions first sub-theme Misled to Knowledge was developed. Misled to Knowledge was described as misinformation and false narratives created to hinder my career aspirations, purposely admitting the truth, causing a toxic workplace culture. The misuse of knowledge can perpetuate untruths and amplify racial bias in the workplace, contributing to the loss of talented individuals. Consequently, this led me to another journal entry as the principal. The exchanged happened like this, *“Ms. Devy was not brave enough to include me on the email chain she penned with the help of the assistant principal, Ms. Stafford (which was not proven but very noticeable) to the entire school, School Board, and the District Office. She wrote, at Hale Elementary change has not been in its favor the past few months. Ms. Devy wrote, we lost some PHENOMENAL teachers at the end of last year, our leader Ms. Annette was promoted within, a new principal was brought in to lead with zero experience or experience being a principal in a school of our size. Ms. Devy went on trying to destroy and attack me. She made assumptions and unproven accusations, such as, “I have personally witnessed the strained relationship,” “Mrs. Shipman made it very clear Ms. Stafford was beneath her,” and “Mrs. Shipman would have a lot more buy in had she let Ms. Stafford help guide her in what we have done in the past, what worked, how to communicate etc., and lastly, “Mrs. Shipman’s leadership is less than par. Her communication with staff is minimal; she doesn’t even acknowledge our staff or program. And, her interactions with students who have less than desirable behaviors are very aggressive. I’m not sure what the solution is other than I firmly believe Mrs. Shipman should not have been put in charge of the largest school in the district with zero principal experience and no experience within our district.*

Misinformation and false narratives shared by a teacher created emotions of injustice. The vindictiveness of staff members on purpose and without investigation caused diminished trust. Communications such as these were meant to hinder my career aspirations, causing a toxic workplace culture. With no protection from executive leadership and no boundaries or expectations put into place, these behaviors were unacceptable. Behaviors such as these in the workplace for any leader is difficult to overcome but make it exceptionally hard for an African American woman because of narratives dictated archetypes in our society. When expectation is not respected and boundaries are not set, this creates a standard for hostile, volatile, bitter, and disrespectful environments for an African American woman as a leader. Given the circumstances in our educational institutions, it is evident that if the roles were reversed, these malic and aggressive behaviors would not be tolerated.

The next, second sub-theme was identified as Scraps to Success. Scraps to Success was defined as providing valueless and outdated information, offering dilapidated materials and equipment as a means to deter positive progression. Another scenario shared with my CFG through a journal entry was a time as a teacher at Sunnyside Elementary. My journal entry started like this: *“two days after the official first day of school, I received the keys to the classroom where I would be teaching. I entered a classroom, which had been used as a storage area, that was old, dirty, smelly, with broken desks full of brown recluse spiders. This classroom was full of items that no one wanted. When I walked over to my desk which was missing a leg and propped up with a stack of books, I knew I had a lot of work ahead of me to prepare the classroom for teaching. There were not enough books for the students, and I did not have any supplies. I thought to myself, “This can’t be real! How can I use broken desks and no supplies, to my advantage?”* As a result, I utilized scraps that no one else wanted to create a plan for success.

Despite starting with a moldy, rundown classroom that wasn't in the best condition, I made the most of it, transforming the space into a positive environment and achieving success as a Level 5 teacher in my first year. I was determined to overcome this challenge by not defining me as a teacher. Experiences like these fostered emotions such as excitement, resilience, confidence, and hope to overcome and produce results. Although these experiences tested my ability to overcome barriers, ultimately, it made me into a stronger knowledgeable teacher. Through consistency and perseverance, I rose above the challenges. These challenges not only shaped my career but also reinforced my belief in the power of optimism and hard work to produce meaningful results.

The third sub-theme, Elusive to Acquired, was defined as not being upfront with vital information that compact a group of people or a person. Elusiveness was also defined to keep parts of information and knowledge secret to advance other's agendas to sabotage my plans or needs. I defined Acquired as, purposely withholding prominent information, forcing me to research information to debunk false information to support to prove and support my reasoning. As these emotion words were presented throughout my journaling, it manifested into the versus code Elusive to Acquired. This conduct was deeply rooted as many of the teachers were aware of this behavior but at the time lacked the courage to end it! I initiated a journal entry with these words: *"I am mad because no one tells you anything important until you've done it wrong. Our principal was out on FLMA when I was notified that I would have to lead the faculty meeting to discuss Academic Achievement scales. After asking many times, how I gain access to the digital contents and given the run around, I finally receive the materials to present. Not only was I given minimal time to understand it for myself, but I also had to make sure I could explain it to others WITHOUT any help."* I had strong emotions connected to this situation that were identified as alarm, hesitation, and unsupportiveness. From adversities to prevailing through barriers and

setbacks, Elusive to Acquired points out how important information sharing was needed to help me achieve the task that was given to me.

### **Ranesa vs. Ranesa**

For this reason, a fresh outlook emerged as Ranesa vs. Ranesa. Journal entries and conversations with my CFG, the concept of ‘Ranesa vs. Ranesa’ emerged, providing me with an avenue to critically reflect on my decisions and address key questions that ultimately influenced my career decision. In the next sub theme, Ranesa vs. Ranesa, I will share portions of journal entries that underscore the emotional impact, psychological, professional significance, and shifts in my identity.

Ranesa vs. Ranesa serves as the last of the three major themes I used to expose my lived experiences with racial bias in the workplace. This versus code puts me for or against myself. The larger theme of Ranesa vs. Ranesa offered a unique viewpoint when crafting the blueprint. This overarching theme developed three sub-themes: Rule Following to Boundaries, Isolation to Family Support, and Losses to Lessons. I defined Rule Following to Boundaries as adhering to the rules and policies set by society and educational institutions. By following these rules, I was able to attend college, secure employment, and provide for my family, which had a positive impact on my life. However, rule following also had a negative side. I defined the negative aspect of Rule Following as the inability to reach my fullest potential due to racism and workplace bias, limiting my freedom compared to non-people of color. This theme reflects the internal struggle. Boundaries were defined as lived experiences that set limits for how I am/was treated, health relationships, and free of toxic behaviors.

The second sub-theme was Isolation to Family Support. I defined Isolation as, being alone, disfellowship, blacklisted, separate, exclusion, cold shoulder. Family Support was defined

as a community of immediate family members that offer emotional and psychological support, protection, guidance, reinforcement and balance. The third sub-theme was Losses to Lessons is defined as situations that were meant to destroy my character, confidence, or level of understanding that would hinder my judgment or stifle perseverance toward achieving a professional or personal desire. For example, I have endured many losses such as but not limited to relationships and job opportunities both positive and negative, however, each loss provided a significant lesson learned for me to achieve the next level of my desire journey. Whether the loss taught me how not to treat others based upon how I was treated, or how to analyze a skill deficit that I needed to get better at.

In a journal shared with my CFG, I remembered a time when I was an Assistant Principal at Hillside Middle School when I recalled a call from my supervisor: "*She informed me that she would be visiting me to discuss a parent complaint regarding horseplaying on the bus. My supervisor was furious that I had not issued the appropriate consequence based upon the conversation with the parent. Thank God the incident was capture on video! As I watched the video, I saw two African American male students wearing football jerseys—let's call them Jersey Number One and Jersey Number Two. The footage showed an incident had occurred, but Jersey One was not the aggressor. I was responsible for the student in Jersey Number One, while another principal handled the student in Jersey Number Two. The student I oversaw was only involved in horseplaying and hadn't actually struck the other student. Accordingly, I issued a consequence for his behavior, as did the other principal for the student in Jersey Number Two. When we met in the conference room, it became clear that my supervisor had confused the two students. The footage showed that the student in Jersey Number Two, not the student in Jersey Number One, had delivered the blow. Despite having followed the Student Code of Conduct, my*

*supervisor did not acknowledge her mistake or apologize. There was no recognition of her premature judgment, nor did she express regret for wanting to write me up!* This was a situation of Ranesa vs. Ranesa because I, as an African American woman, was entrusted by the family to treat their child as though they were mine. However, as an administrator, I was accountable for implementing The Student Code of Conduct.

This incident highlighted a troubling pattern: if I had been a different assistant principal, particularly a white one, it's unlikely she would have been so quick to seek disciplinary action against me. Just like many other incidences I faced, it felt as though I was wrong by default, and they were ready to impose a penalty without proper justification. I went on the write, "*As a Black woman in this school district, I have often faced the harsh reality of mistaken identity and biased assumptions. My character and work ethic have frequently been overlooked, and I have rarely been afforded the benefit of the doubt. This experience was a stark reminder of how these misidentifications can have serious, sometimes life-or-death, consequences, reflecting a broader pattern of injustice that is all too familiar.*" I shared with the CFG that during this moment, I was already put in a place to defend myself and actions. I was made to feel guilty before I was proven innocent.

As a reflection on the Ranesa vs. Ranesa code, I struggled with contradictory emotions daily. When considering Ranesa vs. Ranesa, I had to admit why I wanted to stay and why I wanted to leave. I wanted to stay for the students, teachers, and families that valued my efforts, hoping to see the fruits of my labor. But, on the other hand, I wanted to leave because of microaggression and the effects of racial battle fatigue while working in a racially biased environment as an African American woman in a leadership role. Overall, my experience

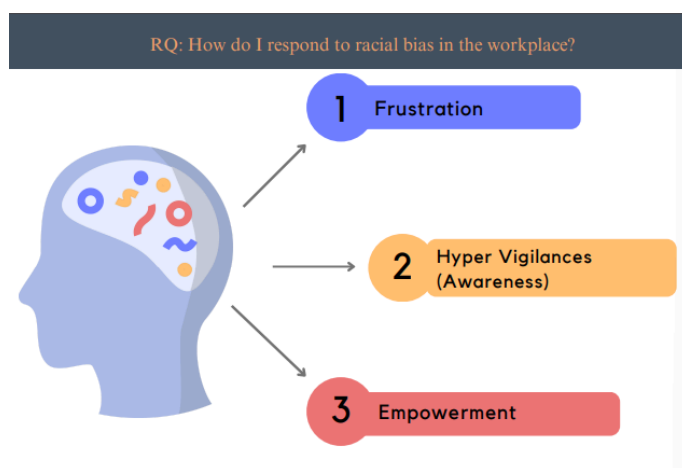
became overwhelming and discouraging. These struggles influenced my decision to consider different career paths.

### Section Three: Response to Racial Bias in the Workplace

Through data collection and analyses, the data yielded three major themes from how I responded to racial bias: Frustration, Hyper Vigilance, and Empowerment. Sharing my journals with members of my Critical Friend Group (CFG) helped me to analyze themes and perspectives from our conversations. After plotting the emotion words, in the previous section, I identified themes based upon the new research question. Figure 5 illustrates the theme from the emotion coding that depicts how I responded to racial bias in the workplace. In this section, the first theme captured was frustration, followed by Hyper Vigilance and Empowerment. A quick glance at figure 5 shows that Frustration, Hyper Vigilance, and Empowerment were the most frequent among emotions that appeared during journal entries. Based upon these emotions, I developed my own interpretation of these words.

In this section, the first theme for how I responded to racial bias in the workplace was frequent feeling frustration, constantly remaining hyper vigilant, and moments of empowerment. Figure 7 illustrates how I responded to racial bias in the workplace. Beginning with the first theme of frustration, I will share how I responded to racial bias by incorporating my personal experiences and reactions from journal entries shared with my CFG. Portions of my journal entries will be shared from Sunnyside Elementary, Hillside Middle Schools, and Hale Elementary to help provide insight and context.

Figure 7



My experiences and responses on how I responded to racial bias in the workplace has connected my understanding of myself as an educator and leader. The second part of my research examined how I experience racial bias in the workplace. Similar to the data collected from how I responded to racial bias, three themes and sub-themes from how I experienced racial bias emerged. The data captured these experiences: Ranesa vs. Systemic Inequity, Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions, and Ranesa vs. Ranesa. The question to be answered here is on how I responded Responses to Racial Bias in the Workplace? By introduction, Frustration, Hyper-Vigilance (Awareness), and Empowerment as the primary cluster words to capture the broader range of emotions I experienced throughout my roles as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. In the previous sections, I introduced how I experienced racial bias in the workplace. For the section, I will share how I responded to racial bias in the workplace.

### **Frustration**

Building on how do I respond to racial bias in the workplace, the emotional word identified most frequently was, Frustration. The emotion word frustration was the third emotion to emerge, identified as both persistent and everlasting. Frustration appeared through the study as dominant and indestructible. Frustration was defined by Merriam-Webster as a deep

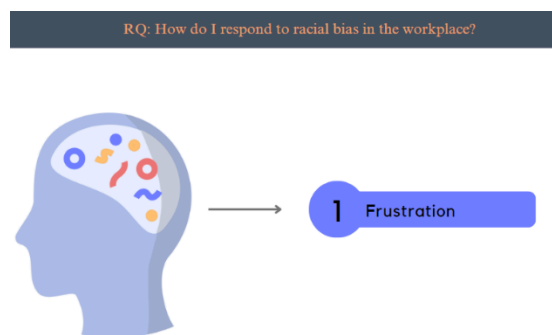


Figure 7

chronic sense or state of insecurity and dissatisfaction arising from unresolved problems or unfulfilled needs (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Similarly, I self- defined frustration as, targeted restrictions that hinder significant change or progress, that effects a marinated group of people, particularly African American women that has a negative impact on policies and procedures, and

working environment contributing to negative state of mind that perpetuates systemic inequalities.

Before sharing journal entries, it is important to know when I speak, my voice will be italicized. In one of journal entry, I shared with my CFG, I experienced the emotion of frustrations, as newly transferred teacher to a new school, *“As a new 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher at Sunnyside Elementary I entered a building I had never been in. I was hoping for a warm welcome, but that was not the case. After being greeted by the principal, who was very friendly and warm. I walked down the hallway, many white teachers, gave me the up down look, and I remember it like it was yesterday as I walked down this long hallway, and it started with the fifth-grade teachers on one side and the fourth-grade teachers on the other side. And I had to walk down this hallway, and as I'm walking down the hallway, the teachers made it very apparent that they gave me the from the bottom to the top of my head, look, turn their noses and close their doors. As I was walking up the hallway, I still held my chin up and my chest out.*

Based upon the body language and unspoken words, I knew this environment was not going to be welcoming until I proved myself. Although in many educational environments, I was considered over-qualified.

Early in my career as an African American teacher, it was frustrating feeling like I had to prove myself repeatedly. I was frustrated proving I had the credentials to teach. Although, I had advanced degrees to prove it. I had obtained my skills and knowledge for respected universities like Alabama A&M University, Cumberland University, and Middle Tennessee State University. It was frustrating living through these microaggressions until, it was perceived by white teachers that I had the skills and abilities. As frustrations continue to mount, it was frustrating to see the

lack of care that some teachers displayed when preparing lessons, using data to make a data-driven decision, and underutilizing professional development to increase their skill set.

My frustration grew to a record high when I understood the rules were different depending on who you were. If you were considered a veteran teacher, known for bullying new teachers or administration and sometimes parents, no one would challenge your action. But on the other hand, if you were a new teacher that discouraged bullying, isolations, and maintained self-confidence, you were deemed difficult to work with or aggressive because you challenged them. I knew early in my career if I spoke to a student or parent in certain situations the way Caucasian teachers did, I would have a been written up or terminated. It was also frustrating living through these experiences because their peers never challenged them to rise to the challenge or critiqued them as much as they critiqued me.

In a journal entry, I shared, *“And yet, this was another time where I had to continuously over a teach. I had to make sure I knew the standard inside and outside. I knew that my students had to have solid teaching every day and my scores had to prove it! It is so frustrating always having to work twice as hard.* Instances such as these caused frustration because I had to continuously be over prepared. I had to be prepared in in a blink of an eye to pivot due to any situation.

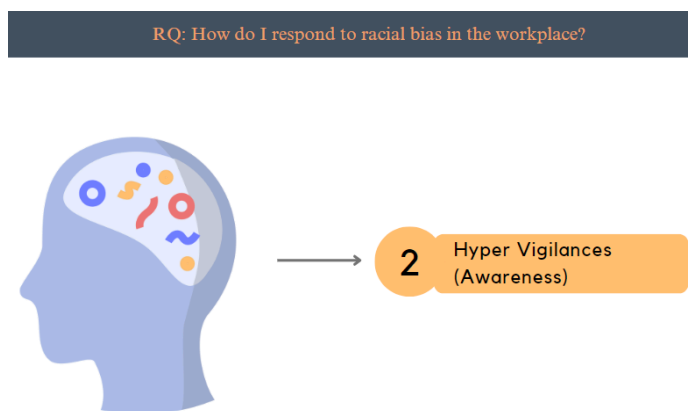
Another example of the frustration would be as simple as the way I chose to dress, which was very conservative. I had to be aware of how I presented myself in the school building. Therefore, I was very conscious of how I dressed. I dressed in a very professional, conservative manner every day. For example, on the days teachers could wear jeans. I made sure to wear khakis because I knew the way jeans looked on them and the way jeans looked on me could be deemed “too tight” yet manifesting the archetypes of Jezebel. Although there was not a rule nor

did anyone ever single me out, the standard was very different for how Caucasian women could dress versus how African American women could dress. The emotional frustration affected the way I dressed, the tone of voice I used when addressing students, parents, teachers, and administration to avoid the stereotypes of being too “loud,” “direct,” or “extra”. Stereotypes, bias, and microaggression such as these caused me to become hypervigilant in my day-to-day activities and leadership style.

### **Hypervigilance**

The second theme for, how do I respond to racial bias in the workplace was identified as Hypervigilance’s. Merriam-Webster

defined Hypervigilance as extreme or excessive vigilance: the state of being highly or abnormally alert to potential danger or threat (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) Within the scope of this study, I used self-defined definition to describe



Hyper Vigilance (Awareness) as the heightened sense of being on defense and prepared for situations that not have yet unfolded, unprofessional behavior, such as acts of violence, potential conflict with students, parents, staff members, or supervisors, while simultaneously navigating present situations while always prearranging for potential “what ifs” on a daily basis to avoid “blame” and scrutiny peers, supervisors, and executive leadership. As a cluster word, I used hyper-vigilances as cluster word also describes positive and negatives experiences as, resilience, empowered, anxious, isolation, ignored, aggressive, and disrespected.

I explored how hyper-vigilance affects performance, confidence, relationships, trust, seen and unseen psychological boundaries as an African American woman. To describe a moment of my lived experiences, I reflected on a time in my journal when I was a principal at Hale Elementary: *“One of the most troubling experiences I had as principal at Hale Elementary involved a student with behavioral concerns. The teachers were well aware of his history and triggers, understanding that although academically capable, his anger could escalate intensely. Despite the focus being on this student, the conflicts at school were rarely with other students; instead, they stemmed from a power struggle between the student and the teachers. One incident was particularly telling: a teacher reported that he had “hit her” during a scuffle over a piece of paper. Upon reviewing the details, it was clear their hands had collided due to momentum, not aggression. Deep down, I believe she knew it was an accident as well, but this was just another way to have this student removed from her class. The teacher and her mentor approached me for a solution. Initially, I sided with the faculty's recommendation to not change the student classroom setting. However, as more behavioral reports accumulated and the power struggle grew stronger, I reconsidered.*

*Believing it was in everyone's best interest, I decided to move the student to a different teaching team to offer the student a fresh start and provide a respite for the initial team. I thought the teachers would have agreed with the decision, but little did I know the power struggle between them was more important. They wanted to “fix him” and win while doing so! This decision did not sit well with the group of teachers. They ceased communication with me, rolling their eyes and giving me the silent treatment. The sabotage became apparent when, “They even involved members of leadership, who would inquire about the situation directly with them, bypassing me entirely. This lack of direct communication was reminiscent of my previous*

*experiences where I had to constantly defend my actions with solid evidence. I explained to members of leadership, the student's past and the rationale behind my decision to move them, emphasizing the growing number of disciplinary issues. Despite this, the teachers felt betrayed, viewing my action as inconsistent with my initial stance. The situation escalated to a power struggle where no one could truly win. It was clear that the student was being targeted, turning every day into a battle for him. Their dissatisfaction was palpable, and no amount of intervention seemed to satisfy or led to any compromise.*

Hypervigilance and awareness were always present for me as an African American woman and principal at Hale Elementary. In a journal entry, about Hale Elementary, I wrote about a time when, *“The leader of the district made a decision to interrupt the school year by transferring a staff member. I remember meeting with the leadership team, begging them not to make this change because I knew how the rest of my school year would go, especially being a new principal in a new district. Although rumor swirled that before I was hired as the new principal there had been conflict amongst staff members and members of leadership. I pleaded with leadership repeatedly for three to four days, not to transfer this staff member but my request did not prevail. Weeks after the transfer, the majority of the school turned against me. From boycotting afternoon pizza to writing malice letters to the school board, I was painted as the villain! At the time, I could not address what really happened, but I had to endure the nasty lies that were told about me and believed. As an African American woman in a leadership role, I felt abandoned, lonely, isolated, and skeptical which increased my hypervigilance. These emotions were frustrating because I knew deep down inside if the shoe was on the other foot, acts of insubordination from the staff members would not be tolerated. I felt this treatment was unwarranted and unfair because the leader did not own their involvement in the situation.*

These moments and many others caused me to develop a strong sense of betrayal. As I experienced this situation, I became aware of the bigger picture, which was to sabotage my career. Due to the lack of support, ownership, and courage to confront toxic behaviors, I found myself protecting my mental health and self-worth. Instead of holding everyone accountable, I developed a heightened sense of awareness, sharing, *“The lack of professional respect, and the baseless accusations believed by others, left me feeling that my side of the story was both unimportant and powerless”*. As an African American woman in a leadership role, the constant awareness and societal reminders proved the rules of microaggressions and racial biases have not changed in America for me.

As an assistant principal at Hillside Middle School, moments of positive Hyper-vigilance emerged, *“When a seventh-grade student, was unexpectedly reunited with her first-grade teacher, which was me! This moment was particularly touching because of the fond memories. And, it also highlighted the compassionate spirit of our school. The student's guardian had expressed concern about providing Christmas gifts, explaining that she had suddenly become responsible for her niece and nephews and was struggling to afford presents. I immediately reassured her not to worry, promising that we would take care of it. With my principal's permission, I sent out a school-wide email informing teachers of the situation without disclosing too many details. I simply noted that there was a need within our community. The response was overwhelming. Teachers began reaching out, eager to help and contribute. They asked for the children's sizes and offered to provide gifts. I also contacted local community members with whom I had relationships, and they generously contributed as well. Within two to three days, our school office transformed into a bustling gift workshop. Teachers came during their planning periods to wrap presents, organize gifts, and devise a plan for delivery. The collective effort to*

*ensure this family could have a special Christmas was truly inspiring. Despite the challenges of the situation, seeing the smiles on the children's faces made it all worthwhile. It was a powerful reminder of the goodness in people and the joy that comes from working together. The festive spirit was palpable, with Christmas music playing and a sense of community and love filling the air. This experience reaffirmed my belief in the strength of our school community and our commitment to supporting each other. It was a reminder that, despite our busy lives and the pressures of our roles, we can come together to make a difference. This event also inspired me to continue collaborating with teachers and being proactive in addressing the needs of our students, ensuring that every child feels valued and supported. As an administrator, moments like these are what make the job so fulfilling. They remind us that beyond our professional titles, we are all part of a family that cares deeply for the well-being of our students. It is a privilege to be part of a team that goes above and beyond to create a nurturing environment for every child, and I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to such meaningful work.* The emotions connected to hypervigilance were gratitude, excitement, hope, and pride. I was consonantly aware that we could do so much together if we put aside personal agendas that hindered our ability to overcome microaggression, archetypes of African American Women, and so much more.

Hyper-Vigilance has affected me in a positive and negative way. Hyper-Vigilance has condensed the feeling of always having to be perfect or prepared for the what ifs. Given that my negative experiences in the schools' system have outweighed the positive experiences, I choose to remain positive. If I chose to treat others as I have been treated, I would only be contributing to the problem. Hypervigilance has shaped many aspects of my life, influencing how I perform my job, dress, and present myself in public. Yet, I constantly carry the weight of debunking

stereotypes and dismantling archetypes of African American women, using my awareness not to conform, but to rise above and redefine those expectations.

## Empowerment

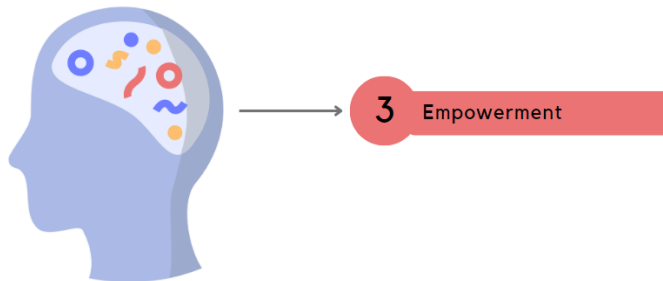
The third section on how I responded to racial bias in the workplace focused on empowerment.

Empowerment was a consistent but profound emotion that shaped the outcome of my career. The purpose of this study is to reflect on my journey and

empower other African American women in leadership by sharing strategies for overcoming systemic barriers, fostering inclusion, and building strong systems of support. I will expand on my explanation and understanding of transformative lived experiences, both positive and negative, as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal that strengthen me during moments of uncertainty or for moments of confirmation. According to Merriam-Webster, empowerment is defined as, the state of being empowered to do something: the power, right, or authority to do something (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Empowerment also contains growth either sustained or hindered by adversity, as well as the strength displayed when facing challenges. As a cluster word, empowerment also describes anger, alarm, powerlessness, excitement, resilience, and determination. I experienced empowerment as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. I reflected on my experience as a teacher when empowerment was present in a journal entry. I wrote in my entry about a time at Sunnyside Elementary when the community, teachers, and students rallied behind me. I begin my

RQ: How do I respond to racial bias in the workplace?



journal entry by writing, *“At Sunnyside Elementary, the bigger fight was against stereotypes—stereotypes of rural communities being labeled as “poor rednecks,” “country bumpkins,” or “welfare queens.” As a team of teachers and as a community, we were united in overcoming these misconceptions. The focus wasn’t on racial biases; it was on proving that our students were not any of these horrible labels. We fought extremely hard that year to change the mentality of the students and others who doubted their abilities. We poured into these students and their families. Feeling supported, having a sense of belonging, and balancing professional growth as an educator, receiving mentorship for other teachers and building relationships, fostered emotions of joy, determination, allyship, trust, and satisfaction, just to name a few. At Sunnyside Elementary, I also journaled about a time when, “I remember when the parents and my colleagues realized that I was there for the long haul, and I was happy being a part of this community. I cared deeply about my students, their success, and the community I was now a part of. They rallied around me, accepting me as one of their own. I knew when they accepted me as their own, they would protect me from vicious and mean-spirited people. In this community the color of a person’s skin was not the main attraction, but the depth of the heart and character meant more than anything. This community stood by the saying, “Your word is your bond.” As an African American woman in leadership, empowerment meant acceptance and belong, psychological safety and proceeding with sensitivity, when dealing with cultural and identity, and denouncing racial bias in the workplace.*

These positive emotional responses to racial bias in the workplace empowered me to remain in the field of education and motivated me to work harder, fueled by the positive influence I experienced. As a result of this encouraging experience, I aspired to take on more responsibilities, pursued a coaching role, and obtained my administrator licenses to step into

leadership positions. In contrast, the negative experiences far outweighed the positives. I documented a moment in my journal where, *“As the administrator, I found myself feeling devastated and resentful. Time and time again, no matter what happened, the blame always seemed to fall on me. It didn’t matter that I had followed the textbook approach in supporting teachers and students or whether I had provided gifts for the grade level to increase morale, my enough were never good enough nor appreciated! The focus was always on what I could have done differently, and I was tired of it. I started feeling isolated—angry, frustrated, and honestly, scared.* I had a moment when I realized, despite doing more with less and trying to achieve perfection through excellence, I would not be accepted. My knowledge, experience, and my credentials would always be questioned and analyzed beyond anything my peers would experience. I continued to write in my journal, *“I began to feel like I was being unfairly targeted, especially as an African American woman in leadership. My actions were scrutinized, magnified, and criticized far more than others in similar positions. The lack of support from those around me weighed heavily on me. Instead of standing by me, it felt like I was being pushed further into a corner, made to feel inferior for simply doing my job. I began to see a pattern—when I was a teacher, there was no threat to my position however, when I became an administrator, everything changed. Suddenly, I was a threat. My authority, my decisions, and even my presence in the role of a decision-maker were questioned at every turn. It was a harsh realization, but it made me see the stark difference in how I was perceived once I stepped into a leadership role. When I was nurturing, handing out gummy bears, and taking care of students, I was accepted. But the moment I stepped into authority, guiding teachers and making critical decisions, I became a target. It was exhausting and deeply depressing.* These emotions not only served as a harsh reminder of the archetypes imposed on African American women but also ignited a powerful

moment of empowerment, when I fully recognized my abilities, worth, and potential to excel in a new career field.

The very challenges that sought to diminish me fueled my resolve to stand up for myself and take control of my narrative. I made the conscious decision to leave behind educational institutions where I was merely tolerated, and instead, embark on a journey where I would be appreciated and celebrated. I empowered myself to establish professional boundaries, confront microaggressions, and educate others about the realities of racial battle fatigue and the damaging stereotypes placed on African American women. This was not just about survival, it was about reclaiming my power, purpose, and path forward.

### **Experiences with Racial Bias and my Response**

This section will examine how specific experiences of bias shaped my responses. Throughout this study my response to bias has maintained two key themes: emotion or versus. Cambridge Dictionary defined bias as the action of supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way, because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgment (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/bias>, n.d.). The Inclusion School defines implicit bias as, the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. One of the versus that had the strongest impact was *Ranesa vs. Society* because societal bias impacts me every day in every way.

Parents of many young African American child, such as myself are not afford the privilege of shielding their children from the wickedness of discrimination and bias. At a young age, many African American children are taught two sets of rules. For example, as a child I was taught when going into a store to keep your hands inside your pocket and look with your eyes. Keeping your hands inside of your pockets signals that you were not stealing, and it lessens the

chances of being accused of stealing. However, I have witnessed children who are not African Americans walking out of the store with unpurchased items in their hands, only for the cashier to smile and say “Oh, it’s alright, it’s just pieces of candy.” These types of implicit bias are formed through lived experiences, upbringing, and culture influences.

From adolescence to adulthood, I have groomed myself with ways to deal with bias by recording interactions, obtaining witnesses, documenting my experiences, and working twice as hard. As an educator and administrator, these biases still affect me and linger with me. For example, the unfair treatment of tears. *I remembered having a simple disagreement about lesson plans and the activity I was going to do with my class with a white colleague and before you knew, she had taken this disagreement to the principal. When the principal called me into their office, the teacher was still there, with blood-shot eye from crying and a snotty nose. When I sat down to have this conversation, I knew because of the weight of her tears, I was already guilty. But it wasn’t until I played my recording that the tears stopped and the excuses for her unprofessional behavior were discussed.* Instances such as these have taught me to protect myself because many leaders lack the skill set to protect me. Through archetypes of African American women, narratives have depicted and created in such a way that African American women we are undeserving of emotional support, protection, and compassion but this could not be further from the truth. This is one of many reasons why I protect myself through recorded conversation, witness protection, video protection, and provided follow-ups to conversation in writing because if not, I would be painted as the villain and unprotected, placing in me a situation of Ranesa vs. Society Inequity.

## **Impact of Bias on Professional Growth**

As a Black woman in education, I've experienced significant racial bias and unrealistic expectations, particularly during my time as an assistant principal and principal in predominantly white schools. The lack of appreciation and acknowledgment for my hard work has perpetuated a cycle of oppression, where women of color are expected to conform to stereotypes. When advocating for change, I was often dismissed or avoided. This dynamic has profoundly impacted my professional growth, limiting my ability to create meaningful change and pushing me to constantly prove my value. I've often had to rely on video evidence to validate my experiences, as it became a necessary tool to highlight the realities of the bias I faced. Additionally, I've learned that, as Black professionals, we must have a plan A, B, C, and D to navigate the systemic racism present in many educational institutions.

Ongoing implicit racial bias ultimately led me to walk away from a career in education. I realized that not all educational institutions are willing to acknowledge or confront such behaviors. The effects of racial battle fatigue forced me to reconsider my decision to remain in the field, as the continuous exposure to bias took a significant toll on my mental and emotional well-being. While leaving education was difficult, I found some solace in the knowledge that these experiences gave me valuable insight into the systemic issues within the profession. Because of these personal encounters with racial bias, I am now far more deliberate when considering potential employers. Before applying for any position, I research the institution thoroughly, especially looking at the representation of African Americans on staff. I also ask specific questions about inclusion and diversity during interviews for leadership roles, ensuring I understand how these values are implemented throughout the organization. Although the impact

of racial bias has, at times, limited my professional growth by restricting opportunities for allyship and awareness, it has also sharpened my focus on finding environments where I can truly thrive.

### **Professional and Personal Growth**

As I reflect on my experiences and responses for this process, it has allowed me to take a step back and evaluate some of my experiences. I truly believe I have grown tremendously personally and professionally. Personally, it showed me my worth as an African American woman in a leadership role, even though in 2024 there are still organization and communities that do not accept me as an educational leader or someone who can contribute to their communities due to their own cultural biases. While reflecting on my responses, I realized that I was really hurt and emotional drained by the experiences I have had in the educational system, but this process allowed me to heal and close this chapter in my life and to understand that some people will never change but that does not mean we should punish the rest of world for some people's ignorance.

I can truly say these experiences have transformed me into a stronger, smarter, more resilient person and professional. I have been equipped to be an advocate for other African American women in leadership who are currently in some of the same situations I went through. While the archetypes of African American Women are some of the most pervasive and long-standing controlling societal representations and images of African American women that have harm us in every aspect of our lives—from relationships with our families and to our experiences in the educational system. Finally, the professional and personal growth through this

process has allowed me to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference and for that I am grateful!

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

This self-study aimed to explore my cultural identity, background, and experiences that have held profound significance, allowed me to self-reflect and engage in a personal understanding of my experiences and empowered me to achieve my professional goals. I have also presented three perspectives from conversations conducted in a Critical Friend Group (CFG). My research question was: How do I experience and respond to racial bias in the workplace? Throughout this chapter, I will discuss the emotional responses that I had in the workplace due to racial bias and how I experienced racial bias in the workplace. I will discuss how the shield, the research questions, and the S.W.A.G. analysis are connected to support the framework for this study.

### **Summary of Findings**

In reflecting on my journey within educational institutions, three central emotions emerged because of enduring racial bias: frustration, hypervigilance, and empowerment. Each of these emotions reflects a unique aspect of how I navigated the complexities of leadership as an African American woman.

The themes related to my experiences of racial bias in educational institutions emerged as three key struggles: Ranesa vs. Society Inequity, Ranesa vs. Educational Institutions, and Ranesa vs. Ranesa. Throughout my career as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal, I faced racial bias in unique and challenging ways. Every day felt like a battle as if I was constantly confronting something—whether it was systemic racism, institutional policies, and procedures embedded in educational structures, or even a struggle within myself. Each day, I encountered barriers that I had to overcome before I could fully perform my job.

When I entered into this journey of reflection and research, I lacked a strong sense of allyship or support. Over the four years of my dissertation journey, however, I began to build

professional relationships and a support system that helped me confront the scars of racial bias and start the healing process. This enabled me to develop mental tools to better understand the dynamics of racial bias, using concepts like "versus" and emotional coding to navigate these challenges.

As a leader, I gained a deeper awareness of the racial battle fatigue experienced by African American women in leadership. I became more skilled at identifying microaggressions and educating others about African American women's diverse identities and experiences. This reflection and my research helped me better understand what genuinely inclusive environments look like. The data I collected through this dissertation, enriched by reflective inquiry and discussions with critical friends, offered valuable insights into fostering inclusivity in educational spaces.

### **Frustration: A Recurrent Experience**

Frustration was a constant companion throughout my career as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. This emotion stemmed from witnessing repetitive, unaddressed behaviors within school systems and buildings—biases that were either ignored or accepted as the norm. The frustration grew as I repeatedly encountered situations where my concerns, especially those highlighting systemic inequities, were dismissed or trivialized. It became increasingly difficult to function in an environment that failed to address these biases. Being under continuous scrutiny, working twice as hard, and lacking protection during difficult situations all contributed to a persistent feeling of frustration. Moreover, when raising these issues as the minority voice in the room and seeing no action taken, my frustration deepened. It was as though speaking up only amplified the bias, leading to further isolation and disillusionment.

**Hypervigilance: The Response to Bias**

Frustration eventually gave rise to hypervigilance. This heightened awareness permeated every aspect of my role in education, influencing how I dressed, spoke, and performed my duties as a teacher and administrator. As an African American woman in a leadership position, I was acutely aware that there was no room for error. I had to be constantly aware of the way I presented myself, knowing that any misstep would be judged more harshly compared to my non-minority peers. Unlike them, I was not afforded the luxury of learning on the job. I was expected to know everything from the outset, which placed immense pressure on me to overachieve and strive for perfection. This hypervigilance extended beyond the professional realm, seeping into my personal life. I felt compelled to maintain the same vigilance to navigate society as a Black woman.

**Empowerment: Rising Above Bias**

Despite the challenges of frustration and hypervigilance, empowerment emerged as a powerful counterforce. Over time, I learned that I was more than the racial and gender stereotypes imposed on me. I realized I had the agency to define my identity and capabilities beyond societal expectations. This sense of empowerment fueled my pursuit of higher education and career advancement. It also enabled me to set healthy boundaries, both professionally and personally. Perhaps most importantly, empowerment allowed me to support and coach other African American women who face similar struggles in educational spaces. Through this empowerment, I was able to help others combat microaggressions and racial fatigue, providing them with the tools necessary to navigate these challenges effectively.

## **The Cycle of Bias and Personal Growth**

At the core of my frustration was the feeling of voicelessness—my lived experiences as an African American leader were often invalidated or only deemed relevant when discussing racial issues. I was not seen as an authority in education or leadership outside of my race. This marginalization intensified my sense of frustration and drove me to become hypervigilant. However, this cycle of bias also catalyzed my growth. Through my experiences, I recognized that hypervigilance, while burdensome, was a necessary survival tool in a biased system. However, through empowerment, I truly thrived, ultimately turning my struggles into opportunities for personal and professional advancement.

A complex interplay of frustration, hypervigilance, and empowerment marks my experience of bias in educational institutions. These emotions not only shaped my journey but also provided a framework through which I could navigate and ultimately rise above the challenges of racial bias in leadership roles. I hope that by sharing these experiences, I can help others facing similar obstacles find their paths to empowerment and success.

Throughout my career, unconscious bias has shaped how others perceived me at different stages, often applying archetypes of African American women that did not align with who I truly am. As a teacher, I was seen through the lens of the "Mammy" archetype, someone nurturing, supportive, and non-threatening. My personal goals, such as becoming an administrator, did not challenge this perception at first. However, as I moved into leadership roles, a shift occurred. The "Sapphire" archetype came into play, portraying me as overly assertive, direct, and even argumentative simply because I was forthright in my leadership approach.

I became hyper-vigilant of these biases and stereotypes and adjusted my presentation. I became conscious of how I spoke, choosing my words carefully, managing my tone, and ensuring I debunked the "Jezebel" stereotype by being mindful of my appearance. However, this hyper-vigilance, though necessary, created new challenges. It was exhausting to navigate the expectations placed on me while simultaneously challenging the archetypes that others imposed on me.

As my experiences evolved, so did the stereotypes applied to me. However, this journey also provided me with insight and resilience. Now, I am more equipped to recognize when these stereotypes surface. I use that knowledge to educate others and reflect on how deeply these biases can affect perceptions of African American women in leadership.

The shield (Figure 1.2) represents my conceptual framework for understanding the racial bias I experienced throughout my career. It visually illustrates the intersection of various challenges I have faced, such as microaggressions, imposter syndrome, and the psychological impact of navigating a biased system while also balancing professional expectations and cultural identity. The new shield encompasses the stereotype of Archetypes of African American women. Each quadrant of the shield—Background Experiences, Culture and Identity, Racial Battle Fatigue, and the Three M's—reflects specific aspects of my journey as an African American leader within educational institutions. These elements show how systemic bias and social expectations have shaped my role and identity over time.

At different stages of my career, the shield has operated as a source of strength and a burden. Early in my career, particularly as a teacher, the "Background Experiences" quadrant dominated my understanding of myself, with issues like imposter syndrome and lack of trust

shaping how I engaged with others. However, my sense of belonging and the validation I sought from academic achievement, represented in the "Culture and Identity" quadrant, also fortified me, allowing me to push through the biases I encountered. As I took on leadership roles, the shield became heavier. The "Racial Battle Fatigue" quadrant, reflecting the pressures of code-switching and burn-out, became more prevalent as I constantly navigated expectations to be both a role model and an equal among peers despite being perceived through biased lenses.

As I gained more experience, the shield evolved from merely being a defense mechanism into a reflective tool, prompting deeper understanding and introspection. I recognized the full scope of how racial battle fatigue and microaggressions—represented in the "Three M's" quadrant—became embedded in my daily work. This evolution forced me to reconsider how I carried the burden of bias and inspired a shift from merely surviving within these systems to actively advocating for change. This growing awareness allowed me to understand how my experiences, once purely burdensome, could also inform the strategies I now use to address and challenge these biases more effectively as a leader.

### **Personal Impact Analysis (S.W.A.G.)**

For the Personal Growth Framework sections, I reflected on my personal growth using the S.W.A.G. framework—Strengths, Weaknesses, Analysis, and Gains—to critically evaluate my journey and identify areas for improvement. Drawing from the strategic roots of the SWOT framework, I adapted its concepts to create a more personalized tool that focuses on introspection and self-development. SWOT analysis is the planning and collaboration tool used to assist businesses and people in evaluating a project or idea to formulate a business plan (Harmon, 2022). The SWOT framework has historically been used to assess business strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. However, by reimagining it as S.W.A.G., I have applied these principles to explore how internal and external factors have influenced my professional path. This strategic lens has helped me uncover hidden truths about myself and provided a clearer understanding of how to move forward.

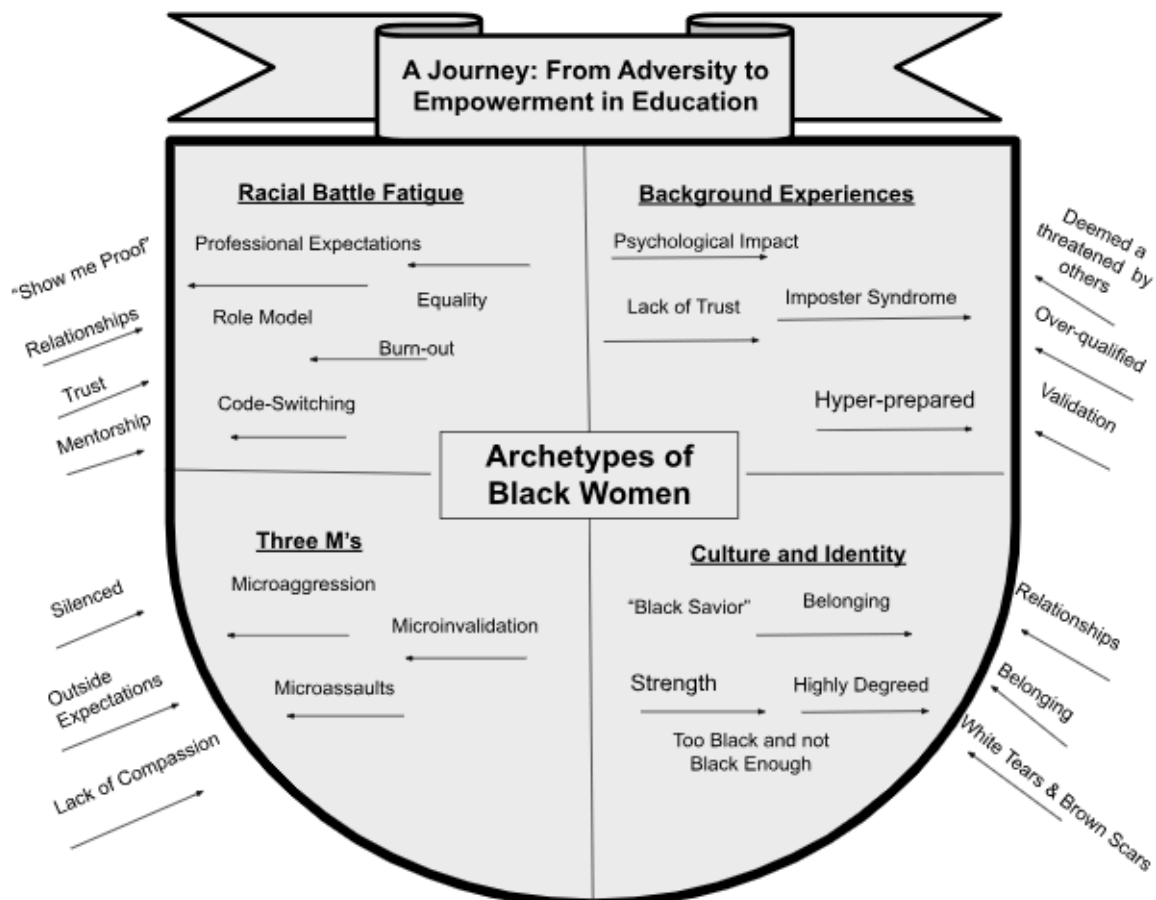
Throughout this process, I identified my strengths, particularly my tenacity and problem-solving abilities. However, through deep reflection, I recognized that these strengths, when overused, led to imposter syndrome and self-doubt. By embracing vulnerability and acknowledging that collaboration is a strength, I redefined my understanding of my capabilities. This shift has made me more confident in advocating for diversity and inclusion and confronting microaggressions within educational institutions. Additionally, I realized that what I previously considered weaknesses, such as self-criticism and internalized doubt, could be reframed as growth areas. By shedding the assumptions that I was "too much" or "overachieving," I embraced my unique perspective and allowed it to drive my success.

Ultimately, the Personal Growth framework has been a tool for personal reflection and a guiding force in navigating systemic challenges, such as racial battle fatigue. I have used this framework to initiate meaningful conversations about equity and inclusion, fostering more open dialogue about the experiences of marginalized communities. I can communicate assertively and advocate for systemic change within educational spaces by gaining clarity through this process. My introspective work has transformed my weaknesses and strengths into catalysts for positive change, giving me a stronger foundation to continue making a meaningful impact in my career and beyond.

## **New Shield**

The shield, initially a tool for physical protection, symbolizes a journey of personal and professional evolution. What once served to defend against external threats has now become a symbol of inner strength and empowerment. Over time, this shield has grown beyond its original purpose, representing how challenges like racial bias and adversity have been met with resilience and strength. Instead of just providing protection, the shield educates and empowers others. It has evolved into a tool for fostering understanding, sparking learning, and promoting leadership. This transformation reflects the growth of the individual who wields it and the broader impact they make by using their experiences to uplift others, helping others face challenges and emerge stronger.

Figure 8

*The New Shield***The intersection of Shield and SWAG**

The shield and the S.W.A.G. framework have been pivotal in helping me understand my journey as an African American woman in education, particularly in navigating the complexities of systemic bias and racial dynamics. The shield serves as a conceptual framework that visually represents my challenges throughout my career. The quadrants—Background Experiences,

Culture and Identity, Racial Battle Fatigue, and the Three M's—illustrate the intersecting factors that have shaped my experiences, such as imposter syndrome, code-switching, and microaggressions. These challenges, compounded by the expectations placed on me as a leader, helped me recognize how much of my professional identity has been influenced by external perceptions rather than my internal goals.

The S.W.A.G. framework, focusing on Strengths, Weaknesses, Analyzing, and Gains, complements the shield by providing a structured approach for reflecting on these experiences. S.W.A.G. allows me to scrutinize my strengths and weaknesses in the context of the challenges identified in the shield. For example, while the shield highlighted how imposter syndrome and lack of trust affected my confidence early in my career, the S.W.A.G. framework helped me turn that self-doubt into an opportunity for growth. It showed me how to embrace vulnerability as a strength and allowed me to leverage my unique perspective as a source of empowerment rather than a limitation.

Together, these frameworks deepened my understanding of resilience, boundaries, and advocacy. The shield revealed the need for me to establish stronger boundaries to protect my mental well-being, particularly when navigating microaggressions and racial battle fatigue. S.W.A.G., in turn, gave me the tools to analyze how I can turn those challenges into moments of advocacy. Reflecting on my journey through these frameworks, I have developed the confidence to speak up against systemic issues and actively contribute to creating a more inclusive environment in educational spaces. Both frameworks have guided my personal growth and empowered me to use my experiences to advocate for necessary changes within educational institutions.

## **Implications for Educational Leadership, School Policy and Practice**

Collecting data and creating a safe space for African American women to share their personal experiences is essential. It's not only about providing a supportive environment, but also about gathering meaningful data that can be used to analyze, support, and identify areas where educational institutions can grow, especially when recognizing the signs of racial battle fatigue. Through this self-study, I was able to reflect on how I personally respond to and experience bias in the workplace, leading me to develop the BRIDGE form.

BRIDGE stands for Battling Racial Inequities Documentation for Growth and Empowerment, symbolizing the journey from adversity to empowerment. This tool helps document experiences with racial inequities and serves as a pathway for personal growth and resilience. It acts as a bridge for recognizing challenges, emotions, and microaggressions, while also revealing the hidden struggles African American women may face in the workplace. By using this form, educational institutions can become more aware of these underlying issues, helping to break down the barriers that often force individuals to shield themselves, whether in positive or negative ways, while at work. The Bridge Form collects the following information.

- I. The person's role within the organization (individual contributor, supervisor, manager, director, executive leader).
- II. Description of the person's role:
  - A. Individual Contributor- Performs tasks without supervisory duties.
  - B. Supervisor, Manager, or Director- Oversees day-to-day team activities or  
Manages teams and operational functions.
  - C. Executive Leader- Sets strategy and organizational direction.
- III. Involvement Identifier:

- A. Aggressor- The person responsible for the bias or microaggression (e.g. colleague, supervisor).
- B. Non-Aggressor- Anyone present but not actively participating in the incident.
- C. Ally- A person who witnessed the incident and offered support, either by intervening, providing comfort, or later addressing it with the aggressor.

#### IV. Microaggression Identifier:

- A. Participants select and identify the microaggression experienced.
  - 1. Archetype
  - 2. Stereotyping
  - 3. Invisibility
  - 4. Dismissiveness
  - 5. Hyper Vigilance
  - 6. Over-scrutiny
  - 7. Culture Appropriation
  - 8. Exclusion

#### V. Emotion Identifier:

- A. Participant selects and identifies the emotion experienced.
  - 1. Frustration
  - 2. Anxiety
  - 3. Anger
  - 4. Isolation
  - 5. Discomfort
  - 6. Exhaustion

7. Resentment
8. Powerless

VI. Participants are asked to share their story.

Participants can choose the action steps they have taken:

1. Talked to a friend.
2. Avoided the situation.
3. Confronted the aggressor.
4. File a written complaint with Human Resources.

This data collection tool offers a way for African American women to identify some of their emotions when facing microaggressions and racial battle fatigue. This tool can also be used in all educational institutions as a means for providing support, acknowledging how someone is responding to and experiencing racial bias in the workplace. This tool can also be used as a preventative measure to rectify workplace biases or as a tracking tool to better understand why some African American women decide to seek other employment options.

Additionally, schools should create open dialogues about microaggressions and implicit bias to foster a more inclusive environment that supports diversity at all leadership levels. Providing spaces where African American women can advocate for themselves and others is key to promoting retention and professional growth.

In higher education, leadership programs should include comprehensive modules on the unique challenges faced by African American women in educational leadership, incorporating strategies for overcoming systemic bias, developing resilience, and advocating for diversity and inclusion. These programs should also include mentorship and sponsorship opportunities,

ensuring that African American women in leadership are given the resources and support needed to navigate their careers successfully.

### **Implications for Future Research and Recommendations**

The work on inclusivity in educational institutions is not finished. The implications for future research are addressed by asking, “What do the research findings of the study mean for the researcher and specific subgroups/populations - beyond the basic interpretation of the results?” How might the research findings be important for and inform subsequent research.

Based on my learning, it is critical for districts and state-level policies to address the need for mentorship programs and support networks specifically designed for African American female educators. These mentorship programs should focus on creating safe spaces where African American women in leadership can connect, share experiences, and receive guidance from those who have navigated similar challenges. Additionally, district and state policies must work toward cultivating inclusive environments by acknowledging the specific challenges that African American female leaders face, such as racial battle fatigue and microaggressions. Developing structured support networks that address these issues will not only help retain African American educators but also empower them to flourish in leadership roles.

K-12 schools can implement mentorship and support systems that focus on both personal and professional development for African American female educators in leadership. These programs should offer mentorship from senior leaders, as well as opportunities for African American women to collaborate and build networks. Additionally, schools should create open dialogues about microaggressions and implicit bias to foster a more inclusive environment that supports diversity at all leadership levels. Providing spaces where African American women can advocate for themselves and others is key to promoting retention and professional growth.

Additionally, policies should include mandatory training on diversity, equity, and inclusion for all staff, focusing on recognizing and dismantling systemic bias. This approach could foster a deeper understanding of the importance of supporting African American female educators and pave the way for equitable hiring, promotion, and retention practices that value diverse leadership.

In higher education, leadership programs should include comprehensive modules on the unique challenges faced by African American women in educational leadership, incorporating strategies for overcoming systemic bias, developing resilience, and advocating for diversity and inclusion. These programs should also include mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, ensuring that African American women in leadership are given the resources and support needed to navigate their careers successfully.

One of the primary challenges I faced during the self-study process was confronting deeply ingrained biases and assumptions, both external and internal. This introspective process forced me to examine my own coping mechanisms, such as code-switching and managing microaggressions, and how these experiences shaped my leadership journey. The limitations of self-study include the inherent subjectivity of the process, as it reflects my personal experiences and may not capture the broader perspectives of all African American women in leadership. This could limit the generalizability of my findings.

Future research could benefit from expanding the scope of this study by incorporating the experiences of other African American women in education, both regionally and nationally. Additional studies could explore the intersectionality of race, gender, and leadership to understand how these dynamics play out in different educational settings. Further investigation

into the long-term impact of mentorship programs on African American female educators' career advancement would also provide valuable insights.

Throughout the research process, I have experienced profound personal and professional growth. By reflecting on my experiences through the S.W.A.G. framework, I have gained clarity on how my strengths, weaknesses, and resilience have shaped my journey as an African American woman in educational leadership. Addressing racial bias in education is crucial because it not only impacts the individuals experiencing the bias but also hinders the creation of inclusive, diverse environments where all educators can thrive. This journey has reinforced the need to confront and dismantle the systemic biases that limit the potential of African American women in leadership.

My call for change in educational institutions is simple but powerful: we must create more equitable and inclusive environments that value and elevate diverse voices, especially those of African American women. Educational leaders and institutions must commit to fostering spaces where African American women can lead authentically without fear of bias, microaggressions, or isolation. By implementing policies and practices that support diversity and inclusion, we can build a future where African American women are empowered to succeed, contribute, and lead with confidence.

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