EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN TEACHER EXPERIENCES

AND ATTRITION IN DIVERSE K-8 SCHOOLS

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the College of Education

William Paterson University of New Jersey

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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By

James Hegybeli

July, 2025

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ABSTRACT

African American teacher attrition in diverse K–8 schools continues to outpace that of their peers, particularly in schools serving historically marginalized populations. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of African American current and former educators in the New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut tri-state region. Using a theoretical framework grounded in critical race theory, social learning theory, and transformational and servant leadership models, this study examined the systemic, cultural, and institutional factors influencing attrition. Through thematic analysis of semi structured interviews with 10 teachers, six core themes emerged: lack of administrative support, limited mentorship and peer networks, emotional burnout, negative school climate and culture, barriers to professional advancement, and the significance of racial identity and representation.

This study introduces the term *African American equity gap attrition* to describe the identity-linked, structural conditions that disproportionately push African American educators out of the profession. Findings highlighted how racial isolation, systemic inequities, and unsupportive leadership converge to undermine teacher retention. The study concludes with recommendations for practice and policy aimed at fostering culturally responsive leadership, enhancing mentorship opportunities, and promoting equity-driven school climates. Implications support the urgent need for sustained retention strategies that center the experiences of African American teachers and prioritize educational equity.

DEDICATION

To my Mother and Father—

This work is dedicated to you, with profound love and gratitude. Your sacrifices, steady encouragement, and constant belief in my potential have been the foundation of every step I've taken. I would not have reached this milestone without your unwavering presence and support. Thank you for standing behind me, even during the moments I doubted myself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to the many individuals who supported me throughout this dissertation journey. First and foremost, I extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. Wallace, my dissertation chair, whose consistent support and guidance were instrumental in shaping this work. Her dedication to meeting with me weekly and reviewing every draft with care and insight kept me focused and moving forward, even during the most challenging moments.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Alford and Dr. Hill, for their thoughtful feedback and encouragement. Dr. Alford, in particular, pushed me to think critically and supported the development of the term *African American equity gap attrition*, a concept that became central to this study.

To the faculty at William Paterson University, thank you for helping me grow both academically and personally. I want to acknowledge Dr. Seal, Dr. Fancera, and Dr. Mohamad for their leadership, mentorship, and ongoing support.

This work would not have been possible without the educators who participated in this study. I am truly thankful for their time, honesty, and willingness to share their stories. Their voices are the heart of this research.

To my sister, Nicole Hegybeli, and her fiancé, Chase Hamilton—thank you for standing by me, encouraging me through difficult times, and reminding me to stay grounded. To my girlfriend, Melissa Manzella—your love, patience, and understanding made this journey lighter, even when the work felt overwhelming. And to my friends, Anthony Tozzi and Sam Vovsi, thank you for showing up for me with support, humor, and perspective when I needed it most.

This dissertation is not just a reflection of my work, but a testament to the community that helped carry me through it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

As societal dynamics continue to evolve at a rapid pace, teacher attrition has emerged as a critical concern within the education sector. African American teachers are increasingly vocal about their demands for improved working conditions and greater support from school leadership. These growing concerns reflect a broader trend where educators seek environments conducive to professional growth and job satisfaction. In particular, African American teachers seem to be at the forefront of this trend when it comes to continuity and longevity of their careers. Concurrently, school administrators are confronted with the need to reassess their leadership practices to address the pressing challenge of retaining African American teachers.

In New York City, the teacher turnover rate in public schools increased to approximately 17% by the 2021-2022 school year, reflecting significant challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and diverse areas such as NYC being particularly affected (NYC Independent Budget Office, 2023). Additionally, a 2022 survey by Brookings found that 55% of African American teachers across New York State were considering leaving the profession sooner than planned due to burnout and stress (Brookings, 2023).

In New Jersey, there was also a notable rise in teacher turnover after the pandemic began, with the state experiencing one of the highest increases in teacher attrition rates in the region. Some districts reported up to a 4% rise in teacher attrition during the 2021-2022 school year (Education Resource Strategies, 2023). In high-poverty schools, the teacher attrition rate increased by approximately 6% during the 2021-2022 school year compared to pre-pandemic levels (Education Resource Strategies, 2023). This surge in teacher vacancies shows the growing

difficulty of retaining educators, especially early-career African American teachers (Education Resource Strategies, 2023).

Connecticut followed a similar pattern: teacher turnover rates increased significantly in the years following the pandemic, with some districts reporting up to a 10% rise in turnover compared to pre-pandemic levels (RAND Corporation, 2024). This increase was most pronounced in districts with higher poverty rates and more diverse student populations. Statewide, attrition rates in 2021 and 2022 were higher than in the previous 5 years, with the impact being particularly severe in schools serving high-need populations (Learning Policy Institute, 2024).

Central to the discussion of teacher attrition is the realization that the shortage of qualified educators is not only real, but also more severe than previously estimated. When examining key indicators of teacher quality, including certification, relevant training, and experience, the shortage becomes even more pronounced. High-poverty schools, in particular, bear the brunt of this, grappling with a lack of credentialed African American teachers to meet the needs of their student populations (Education Resource Strategies, 2023). Culturally diverse districts have more teacher attrition, with staff turnover rates 6% higher than in other settings (Education Resource Strategies, 2023). This constant churn of educators undermines the continuity and stability necessary for sustained academic success across all levels of education.

Addressing the root causes of teacher attrition requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses various dimensions of the educational ecosystem. School administrators must engage in reflective practice, critically evaluating their leadership styles to identify strategies that foster a positive school climate and contribute to teacher retention. This entails creating supportive environments where educators feel valued, empowered, and equipped to succeed.

Efforts to mitigate teacher attrition must extend beyond individual schools and districts to encompass broader systemic changes. Policy interventions are needed to bolster the teaching profession, attract new talent, and provide ongoing support to existing educators.

Attrition among African American teachers is a formidable challenge that demands urgent attention and concerted action. By acknowledging the severity of the problem and embracing proactive measures to address it, stakeholders within the education sector can work collaboratively to cultivate environments where African American teachers thrive and students excel.

Statement of the Problem

The education sector in the United States is currently fighting an employment crisis: an escalating trend of teacher attrition threatens the stability and effectiveness of our schools. This crisis is ratcheted up in diverse community schools characterized by low socioeconomic status and a majority of historically marginalized students. In fall 2021, the percentage of students who attended high-poverty schools was highest for Hispanic students (38%), followed by Black students (37%), American Indian/Alaska Native students (30%), and Pacific Islander students (23%). This percentage was lowest for White students (7%), Asian students (13%), and students of two or more races (15%; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). In these communities, the rapid departure of African American teachers has created a vacuum that is increasingly difficult to fill, exacerbating existing challenges and undermining the quality of education provided to students.

Despite the urgency of the situation, there exists a significant gap in research surrounding the underlying causes of African American teacher attrition and the reluctance of African American individuals to pursue careers in education. This lack of understanding hamstrings

efforts to develop targeted interventions and solutions to address the problem at its roots. While numerous studies have outlined factors contributing to teacher attrition, less research has explored the specific, nuanced experiences of African American teachers in diverse, high-need K-8 schools. This study sought to capture these lived experiences and provide a deeper understanding of how they impacted African American teachers' decisions to stay or leave the profession.

One of the central issues contributing to teacher attrition is the absence of effective leadership frameworks within schools. Administrators often struggle to create environments that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion, which are essential components of a supportive and nurturing workplace culture (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). As a result, African American teachers may feel undervalued, unsupported, and disengaged, leading to departure from the profession. Failure to address these challenges makes it more difficult to tackle broader social justice issues and perpetuates a cycle of inadequately prepared educators in our classrooms (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). It also increases existing disparities and inequities within our education system.

Stakeholders within the education sector must recognize the severity of the crisis and take proactive steps to address it. This may involve targeted recruitment and dynamic attrition strategies, ongoing professional development and support for educators, and fostering a culture of inclusivity and equity within schools. By acknowledging and confronting these challenges head-on, the system can begin to reverse the tide of teacher attrition and create environments where educators feel valued, supported, and empowered to make a meaningful difference in students' lives. Ultimately, this will not only benefit African American teachers, but also improve our education system and the overall success of our students.

Purpose of the Study

The primary objectives of this study were to investigate the factors driving African American teacher attrition and assess the potential impact of different leadership styles on retention rates within the education sector. The study focused on diverse community schools, where the challenges associated with teacher attrition are greater (Educational Resource Strategies, 2024). By examining the dynamics and circumstances within these settings, leaders can better understand how the shortage of qualified educators is impacting diverse schools and communities. This analysis used qualitative interviews with teachers to identify specific areas for intervention.

The study examined African American teachers because they play a vital role in fostering inclusive, supportive learning environments for students of color. Research shows that African American teachers can positively influence academic and social outcomes, especially for minority students (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). However, they face challenges such as racial isolation and systemic biases, which contribute to their higher attrition rates. Understanding their experiences will aid in developing effective strategies to support their retention and enhance educational equity.

This research sheds light on the underlying causes of teacher attrition and provides actionable insights to inform policy decisions and institutional practices. By identifying effective leadership strategies and addressing the root causes of teacher turnover, the study can help school leaders improve attrition rates and ensure the stability and effectiveness of our education system, particularly in historically marginalized settings.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following question: How do the experiences and perspectives of African American teachers influence their decisions to stay or leave the teaching profession in diverse K-8 schools?

The study used a qualitative approach to gather data on subjective experiences, perceptions, and underlying factors that contributed to African American teachers' decisions to leave the profession. The primary measure for this question was the narratives and personal experiences of current and former teachers. Secondary measures included factors influencing the decision and any common themes or patterns that may emerge from the interview process. These data provided insight into the subjective experiences and perceptions of African American teachers.

Framework: Education, Leadership, and Social Justice

The complex topic of African American teacher attrition requires a multidimensional approach that references different theories and research within the areas of education, leadership, and social justice. This study integrated insights from social learning theory and critical race theory (CRT), as well as transformational and servant leadership frameworks, to interpret the factors that drive teacher attrition. The leadership frameworks provided lenses through which to examine how school leaders can foster supportive, inclusive environments, and are particularly relevant in addressing the challenges faced by African American teachers, such as racial microaggressions and lack of support. By examining the impact of these leadership styles, this study aimed to identify strategies to promote teacher retention in diverse, high-need schools.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, developed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the importance of observing and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. It is a bridge between behaviorism, which emphasizes change in external behavior through the use of reinforcement and repetition (Bandura, 2016), and cognitive learning theory, which explains learning processes by analyzing mental processes (Bandura, 2016). Bandura's theory posited that people learn new behaviors by watching others (Education Corner, 2023). This observational learning includes four key processes: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Lambda Solutions, 2023). Attention refers to the focus required to learn from a model. Distractions can hinder this process, making attention a crucial first step. Retention involves remembering what was observed, which is essential for the behavior to be later reproduced (Education Corner, 2023). Finally, motivation determines whether the behavior is replicated, influenced by anticipated rewards or punishments (Cherry, 2024).

Bandura's famous Bobo doll experiment showed that children imitated aggressive behavior observed in adults, demonstrating that children who witnessed violence were more likely to act violently themselves (McLeod, 2025). This experiment displayed the impact of observational learning on behavior, and suggests that media violence may influence children's behavior (Cherry, 2023). While the study was conducted on children, the findings can possibly be applied to adults in historically marginalized educational organizations. Educators may be influenced by the experiences and behaviors of their colleagues and school leaders (Bandura, 2016). Observing instances of job dissatisfaction and inadequate support from administrators, as well as negative behaviors, stress, or burnout in their peers, may contribute to African American teachers' decisions to leave the profession.

Social learning theory has broad applications in education. It also integrates the concept of self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's capabilities to execute the actions required to manage a situation. A strong sense of self-efficacy can enhance motivation and persistence, and plays a critical role in how effectively individuals learn through observation. African American teachers can model positive behaviors and attitudes to influence students (Cherry, 2024). By understanding and leveraging the principles of social learning, educators and practitioners can create more effective learning environments that are conducive to teacher retention (Cherry, 2023).

Furthermore, social learning theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how a lack of teacher mentoring may contribute to attrition. African American teachers often serve as role models for students of color, enhancing students' academic and social outcomes (Geiger, 2018). However, the lack of African American role models in the teaching profession can lead to feelings of isolation and decreased self-efficacy among these teachers. Implementing mentorship programs that pair African American teachers with experienced mentors can provide the necessary support and encouragement, potentially reducing attrition rates.

The 2024 Voices from the Classroom Report suggests that while African American teachers report improved morale and optimism, especially regarding student outcomes, structural challenges persist that contribute to high attrition (Educators for Excellence, 2024). These teachers often face isolation, disproportionate workloads, and lack of support, which can lead to burnout despite their positive outlook (Educators for Excellence, 2024). In diverse community schools, underfunding and systemic inequities exacerbate the issue (Educators for Excellence, 2024). Although African American teachers may feel a strong connection to their communities,

unsustainable working conditions could drive many to leave the profession, particularly in these challenging environments.

CRT

CRT serves as a lens through which to analyze the intersections of race, power, and institutional structures within society. In education, CRT highlights the systemic inequities and racial disparities that impact educational outcomes, including teacher attrition. It emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive leadership and policies that address racial injustices within schools, especially in historically marginalized districts.

Ladson-billings & Tate (1995) identified six boundaries for CRT in education, which provide a framework for analyzing the progress that has been made and the continued efforts that need to be made. The six boundaries are as follows:

> CRT in education argues that racial inequity in education is the logical outcome of a
> system of achievement presided on competition; CRT in education examines the role of
> education policy and educational practices in the construction of racial inequity and the
> perpetuation of normative whiteness; CRT in education rejects the dominant narrative
> about the inherent inferiority of people of color and the normative superiority of white
> people; CRT in education rejects ahistoricism and examines the historical linkages
> between contemporary educational inequity and historical patterns of racial oppression;
> CRT in education engages in intersectional analyses that recognize the ways that race is
> mediated by and interacts with other identity markers (i.e., gender, class, sexuality,
> linguistic background, and citizenship status); CRT in education agitates and advocates
> for meaningful outcomes that redress racial inequity. (Dixson & Anderson, 2018, p. 259)

This study used these six boundaries to explore how systemic racial disparities contribute to teacher attrition, as well as how culturally responsive leadership and transformative policies can support equitable and inclusive educational environments.

Through the application of CRT, administrators and teachers can better understand the complexities of racial dynamics within schools, which are a major cause of teacher attrition, especially among people of color. "The educational realities, detrimental effects of poverty, and human despair that often depress low-income communities contribute to high levels of teacher absenteeism, attrition rates, and teacher shortages" (McKinney et al., 2007, p. 9). CRT scholars emphasize that racism is not merely a collection of individual discriminatory acts, but rather a deeply embedded feature of American society, including its institutions and structures (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Racism is the creation or maintenance of racial hierarchy through institutionalized power (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). The United States was founded on laws and policies designed to protect Whiteness and White individuals (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). As institutions function to uphold Whiteness and simultaneously ignore race and racism, inequitable structures remain intact. The function of CRT is to expose and disrupt these systems while centering the knowledge, needs, and visions of communities of color (Matsuda et al., 1993). Attempting to link CRT to teacher attrition, Smith et al. (2007) wrote, "The stress of unavoidable front-line racial battles in historically white spaces leads to people of color feeling mentally, emotionally, and physically drained" (p. 551). Smith et al. identified impacts of racial stress ranging from social withdrawal, lowered aspirations, and exhaustion to anxiety, hypervigilance, anger, and depression. Teachers experiencing this stress are likely to be looking for a change in their lives. Using CRT as a lens

to understand the impacts of structural racism on African American teachers can provide

strategies for educational leaders to combat the problem of attrition.

CRT emphasizes the role of race and socioeconomic status in shaping educational

experiences and outcomes. "Income inequality is of fundamental interest not only to economists,

but also to other social scientists" (Thorbecke & Charumilind, 2002, p. 1477). Without much

surprise, this is also of interest to teachers in disadvantaged school districts. Institutional racism

contributes to systemic disparities in funding, lack of support for teachers, and biased

disciplinary practices. In a field where most teacher educators and teacher candidates are White

and curriculum rarely interrogates oppression because it is structured to privilege White comfort,

teacher education has remained steadfast in reproducing a predominantly White teaching force

with little sociopolitical analysis and deficit frames of students, families, and communities of

color (Amos, 2010; Gist, 2017; Valencia, 2010).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders inspire and motivate followers by articulating a compelling

vision, fostering a supportive and empowering work environment, and promoting individual

growth and development. The presence of transformational leadership within educational

institutions can have a significant impact on teacher job satisfaction, organizational commitment,

and ultimately, teacher attrition (Lin et al., 2022).

Leaders who exhibit transformational leadership behaviors tend to create positive school

climates characterized by collaboration, trust, and a shared sense of purpose. In these

environments, African American teachers may be more likely to feel valued, supported by the

administration, and engaged in the school vision and mission. All of these working conditions

lead to job satisfaction and lower intentions to leave the profession. Conversely, the absence of

transformational leadership or the presence of ineffective leadership styles may contribute to feelings of burnout, disillusionment, and stress among African American teachers.

Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) found that transformational leadership practices were positively associated with teacher commitment and satisfaction, which in turn led to low turnover rates. An earlier study by Wang and Guan (2000) also concluded that transformational leadership behaviors were significantly correlated with reduced teacher turnover rates. Effective transformational school leaders are better positioned to retain teachers and cultivate a culture of excellence within their institutions.

A central aspect of transformational leadership is inspirational motivation: raising followers' awareness, aligning them with the organizational mission and vision, and inspiring them to embrace and commit to these goals. "Inspirational motivation targets the principle of organizational existence, instead of the personality of the leader" (Bass & Avolio, 2004, p. 11). Leaders displaying inspirational motivation work to "energize their followers by viewing the future with optimism, stressing ambitious goals, projecting an idealized vision, and communicating to followers that the vision is achievable" (Antonakis et al., 2003, p. 264). These leaders bring the team together around a common goal, help followers find meaning in their work, and challenge the limits of what followers may deem possible (Bass et al., 2003). Inspirational motivation can further mitigate teacher attrition by fostering a sense of purpose, optimism, and collective commitment among educators.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is another leadership style that may be linked to teacher retention. Servant leadership is a holistic approach where leaders act with morality, showing concern for stakeholders and engaging followers emotionally, relationally, and ethically to bring out their full

potential and empower them to grow into what they are capable of becoming (Canavesi &

Minelli, 2021). Servant leadership has been linked through various mediators to positive

individual and collective outcomes, including behavioral, attitudinal, and performance outcomes

(Canavesi & Minelli, 2021). It has been associated with increased job satisfaction and

organizational commitment in various contexts, and its absence or ineffective implementation

can contribute to teacher attrition. When administrators fail to adopt this leadership approach and

prioritize their own interests over the needs of their followers, African American teachers may

feel unsupported, undervalued, and disengaged from their work, leading to frustration and

burnout.

In response to negative outcomes of self-interested leadership styles, morality-based

leadership styles have recently emerged with the aim of promoting integrity and prioritizing the

support and development of followers (Liden et al., 2015). Servant leaders invest in personal

relationships with employees and other stakeholders to increase trust, loyalty, and commitment.

Key qualities of servant leaders are humility, ensuring followers' development, listening, sharing

in decision-making, behaving ethically and promoting a sense of community (Jit et al., 2016).

The idea is that when followers' needs and well-being are prioritized, they are able to achieve

their goals, and this flows upward so that the leader's goals and the organizational goals are met

in turn (Kohntopp and McCann, 2018).

Importance of the Study

Working environments play a role in teacher shortages, along with low pay and weak

professional development opportunities (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). Teacher attrition harms

students, teachers, and public education as a whole. In addition, the fact that the shortages are

more acute in high-poverty schools challenges the U.S. education system's goal of providing a sound education equitably to all children.

Poor school climates, low relative pay, and other factors are prompting African American teachers to quit and dissuading people from entering the teaching profession. There is a need for policy interventions and institutional decisions that channel assistance and resources to African American teachers who press on despite these barriers. High-poverty schools require extra resources and funding to support students directly and to increase teacher retention rates.

With all of these factors taken into account, it is important to investigate what educational leaders can do to increase the percentage of African American teachers staying in the field. Finding answers to this critical question will provide a road map for school leaders to address the attrition rates in their districts by creating a more positive climate and culture for African American teachers, and in turn improve student success.

Scope of the Study

The study's scope was restricted to African American teachers at diverse community schools serving marginalized students within the tri-state area of New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut. By narrowing the focus to this population, the study sought to generate insights into the pressing issue of African American teacher attrition within diverse educational settings. This targeted approach may facilitate the development of tailored strategies for improving teacher retention rates and enhancing the overall quality of education in marginalized communities.

Equity, Fairness, and Social Justice

I am a White male with teaching experience in diverse K-8 educational settings in New Jersey. While my background, which also includes a Bachelor of Arts in Special and Elementary Education from Seton Hall University and a master's degree in education from William Paterson

University, has provided me with valuable knowledge about the education system, I recognize that I still have much to learn about the specific challenges faced by African American teachers.

During my years as a teacher in a marginalized district, I witnessed firsthand the high rates of teacher turnover, particularly among underrepresented educators. This sparked my interest in exploring the reasons behind teacher attrition. However, I acknowledge that as a White male, I cannot walk in the shoes of those whose experiences differ from mine, especially African American teachers who face systemic racism, isolation, and other challenges that I have not personally encountered.

I approached this study with humility and openness, recognizing that my perspective is limited. I understood the importance of centering the voices of African American educators in this work, and I aimed to amplify their experiences rather than impose my interpretations upon them. I viewed this research as an opportunity to learn from their insights and stories, which are essential to understanding the complexities of teacher attrition.

Throughout this study, I remained mindful of my privilege and the responsibility that comes with it. I was committed to ongoing reflection, actively listening to the participants, and ensuring that their perspectives guided the findings and recommendations of this research. By acknowledging my own limitations, I hoped to contribute meaningfully to the conversation about how we can better support African American teachers and create more equitable educational environments.

The study reflects a strong commitment to addressing social justice issues in education and recognizing the impact of systemic inequities and disparities on educational outcomes, which is particularly significant in marginalized communities and high-poverty schools. The rapid departure of African American teachers from these environments widens educational

disparities, which in turn perpetuates the cycle of inequity. This research promotes equity by focusing on how to mitigate this attrition and ensure there are enough supportive teachers for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background or demographics. It also promotes inclusion by acknowledging and amplifying the stories of an underrepresented group. The qualitative approach presents the subjective experiences and perceptions of African American educators, providing a platform for marginalized voices to be heard and valued. These first-person accounts may help create a future where African American teachers experience more job satisfaction, administrative support, and a more positive culture.

I chose to avoid the term *urban* in this dissertation because it lacks the specificity needed to accurately describe my target population. While *urban* is commonly used to describe schools in metropolitan areas, many urban schools still serve affluent, majority-White teachers and students, which does not align with my focus on low-income, historically marginalized communities. To ensure clarity and relevance, I opted to use more precise descriptors that highlight the economic and cultural contexts of the schools and educators under study and emphasize the challenges faced by these specific groups.

Overall, this research sought to promote social justice within the education sector by addressing the critical issue of teacher attrition in marginalized school districts. By investigating causes of attrition and identifying leadership strategies to address this issue, this study aimed to foster inclusive, supportive environments where all educators feel valued, empowered, and equipped to make a long-lasting and meaningful difference in the classroom. The pursuit of social justice in education requires collective action and a commitment to dismantling barriers of inequity, ensuring that all African American teachers have access to the resources and opportunities needed to succeed.

Key Terms and Definitions

African American Teacher Attrition: The departure of African American educators at disproportionately high rates compared to their peers, often driven by racial isolation, microaggressions, and systemic inequities in diverse schools (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022).

Burnout: A state of physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged stress and overwork. Burnout can lead to emotional detachment and reduced personal accomplishment, and is a key predictor of teacher attrition (Madigan & Kim, 2023).

Critical Race Theory: An analytical framework that examines the role of race and systemic racism in maintaining social inequities. CRT emphasizes the need to address institutional racism in educational settings to promote equity and support teacher retention (Ladson-billings & Tate, 1995).

Culturally Responsive Leadership: A leadership approach that emphasizes understanding and valuing diverse cultural backgrounds, promoting equity, and creating inclusive school environments. This style can mitigate attrition by addressing the unique needs of minority teachers (Gay, 2018).

Diverse Community Schools: Educational settings that serve a variety of student populations in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. These schools are typically located in high-poverty areas and often face systemic challenges such as underfunding and high staff turnover (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011).

Equity and Social Justice: Ensuring fair distribution of resources and opportunities in education. It involves addressing barriers that disproportionately impact marginalized teachers and students (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011).

Historically Marginalized: Refers to groups of people who have been systematically excluded or disadvantaged in social, economic, or political contexts. In education, this includes students and teachers from racial minority backgrounds, low-income communities, and others facing institutional inequities (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022).

Mentorship Programs: Structured initiatives pairing experienced educators with novice teachers to provide guidance and support. Mentorship is linked to higher job satisfaction and lower attrition, particularly among minority teachers (Madigan & Kim, 2023).

Microaggressions: Subtle, often unintentional discriminatory comments or behaviors that communicate negative or derogatory messages based on social identity. These can contribute to feelings of alienation and burnout among minority teachers (Kohli, 2018).

Perception: The process by which individuals interpret and make sense of their surroundings. Teachers' perceptions influence their sense of job satisfaction, their self-efficacy, and ultimately, their decision to stay in or leave the profession (Madigan and Kim, 2023).

Professional Development: Ongoing training and education for teachers aimed at enhancing skills and knowledge. When tailored to address stress management and inclusivity, it has been shown to improve retention (Madigan & Kim, 2023).

Self-Efficacy: The belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or tasks. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to persevere through challenges, resulting in greater job satisfaction and lower attrition (Bandura, 1977; Cherry, 2024).

Servant Leadership: A leadership style where leaders prioritize the growth, well-being, and development of their followers. Effective servant leaders foster inclusive, empowering environments, which can lead to increased teacher satisfaction and reduced burnout (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016).

Social Learning Theory: Developed by Albert Bandura, this theory posits that individuals learn behaviors through observing others, which influences their self-efficacy. In education, observing competent peers can bolster teachers' sense of efficacy, reducing burnout and attrition (Bandura, 1977; Cherry, 2024).

Subjectivity: Refers to the personal perspectives, feelings, and experiences of individuals, which shape how they interpret their environment and situations. In qualitative research, acknowledging subjectivity helps understand the lived experiences of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Systemic Racism: Racism embedded in institutional policies and practices, leading to disparities in resources and opportunities. In schools, it affects teacher support, funding, and retention, particularly in high-need areas (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Teacher Attrition: The phenomenon of teachers leaving the profession before retirement, often due to burnout, low job satisfaction, or lack of support. High attrition rates disrupt school stability and negatively affect student achievement (Madigan & Kim, 2023).

Transformational Leadership: A leadership approach that motivates and inspires followers by fostering a shared vision, providing individualized support, and promoting intellectual stimulation. This style has been linked to enhanced teacher commitment and lower attrition (Bass, 1995; Wang & Guan, 2023).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the literature related to teacher attrition, examining trends, the underlying causes of high turnover rates, and the impact of attrition on students and educational institutions. It begins with an overview of the history of Black teachers in the United States, an analysis of socioeconomic factors and the challenges of working in low-income, diverse areas, and solutions proposed by previous researchers to combat attrition.

Next, the review discusses key theoretical frameworks and concepts that shape the discourse on education, race, leadership, and teacher attrition. This includes an in-depth look at CRT, its application within the education sector, and how it has evolved over time to challenge traditional narratives and address racial inequalities, with specific attention to teacher attrition and the systemic factors contributing to it.

The third section reviews social learning theory and the roles of observational learning and self-efficacy in education. This section emphasizes how new African American teachers learn from more experienced colleagues and how these processes impact job satisfaction. The principles of social learning are analyzed as potential tools to reduce teacher attrition by fostering supportive environments and promoting professional development.

The fourth section reviews the literature on transformational leadership. This section highlights how this leadership style can influence organizational culture in schools, particularly in historically marginalized districts within the New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut tri-state area. It shows how transformational leaders inspire and empower educators, reduce teacher burnout, and create positive school environments that can mitigate teacher attrition.

The last section discusses servant leadership, emphasizing the importance of leaders who prioritize the needs of their followers. It explores how servant leadership can promotes job satisfaction and reduces stress among educators, particularly through ethical behavior, empowerment, and creating a supportive work environment.

History of Black Teachers

At the beginning of the 20th century, the development of Black public schools in the South faced a major challenge: a severe shortage of Black teachers. James D. Anderson (1988) noted, "No adequate common schools could be developed until there were Black teachers to teach in them" (p. 110). Since most Southern White educators refused to teach Black children, and Northern White missionary teachers were statistically insignificant by 1900, the responsibility of educating Black students fell primarily to Black teachers. The training and preparation of Black educators thus became a critical first step in the expansion of common schools for Black children (Anderson, 1988).

In 1900, Black teachers were overwhelmingly trained in private schools, secondary schools, and colleges. Over 70% of Black normal school students were enrolled in private institutions, and 80% of graduates came from these schools (Anderson, 1988). The demand for Black teachers far exceeded supply. In the 16 former slave states, there were 26,770 Black teachers for 2,485,737 Black children of school age, creating a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:93, which far exceeded the White Southern ratio of 1:57 (Anderson, 1988). It was estimated that 35,373 more teachers were required to maintain a ratio of one teacher per 30 students, the accepted standard at the time (Anderson, 1988).

The struggle to train Black teachers was deeply intertwined with ideological battles over Black education. While Northern philanthropists and industrialists sought to shape Black teacher

training to align with the Hampton-Tuskegee model, focusing on industrial and manual labor,

many Black educators resisted these efforts, instead advocating for academic and classical

education (Anderson, 1988). This ideological divide was reflected in the perspectives of Booker

T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Washington, in the book *Up from Slavery* (1901),

supported industrial education as a means of economic uplift, arguing that Black teachers should

focus on vocational training. In contrast, Du Bois stated in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that a

classical liberal arts education was necessary to cultivate a leadership class, including Black

educators, who could challenge systemic oppression. This debate demonstrates the complexity of

the struggle for control over Black schools and the future direction of Black education.

Beyond training, Black teachers played an essential role in sustaining Black education

and advocating for public schools. In the early 20th century, Black communities in the rural

South faced tremendous barriers in establishing common schools. Southern White elites often

sought to suppress Black education, fearing that literacy and schooling would disrupt the

agricultural labor force (Anderson, 1988). Black teachers, along with Black parents and local

leaders, were central to the "second crusade" for Black education, pushing for school funding,

resources, and longer school terms (Anderson, 1988). Michael Fultz, in *The African American*

Teacher in the South, 1890–1940 (1995), highlighted how Black teachers were also activists who

fought against racial discrimination, challenged funding disparities, and helped organize

community efforts to sustain schools.

Despite these efforts, Black public high schools remained scarce. By the 1930s, while

White secondary education had expanded significantly, Black students were largely excluded

from this growth (Anderson, 1988). Many Southern cities lacked any public high schools for

Black students, and those that existed often suffered from severe underfunding. In some states,

Black students had to travel long distances or rely on private schools for secondary education (Anderson, 1988). Black women teachers played an especially critical role in addressing these educational gaps. As Adam Fairclough argued in *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (2007), Black women educators were often at the forefront of grassroots activism, helping to establish schools and secure resources in rural and diverse Black communities.

By 1935, Black teachers had become the backbone of Black education in the South, filling a role that was both instructional and political. They not only taught, but also advocated for school improvements, secured funding, and organized community support for Black education. As Anderson (1988) wrote, "Those who shaped the beliefs and behavior of the teachers would also heavily influence the minds and hearts of Black schoolchildren" (p. 115). This legacy set the stage for the continued fight for educational equity in the decades that followed. Vanessa Siddle Walker wrote in *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (1996) that Black teachers remained key figures in the Civil Rights Movement, preparing students for activism and resisting segregationist policies.

Between the 1930s and early 1950s, Black teachers in segregated schools served their communities as educators, mentors, and advocates for racial uplift. Despite working in underfunded schools with lower pay, they upheld rigorous academic expectations for their students. Walker (2001) explained that African American teachers "worked in dismal, unfair, discriminatory positions, but did not allow themselves to become victims of their environments" (p. 751). Instead, they embraced their role as professionals who were deeply invested in the success of Black students.

During this period, Black educators also contributed to the progressive education movement, particularly in the Southeast, where they participated in the Secondary School Study. This initiative sought to improve curricula and pedagogical methods in African American high schools (Kridel, 2020). Teachers in these schools further developed instructional, curricular, and evaluative methods despite the challenges of racism and segregation (Kridel, 2020). Influenced by Dewey's (1938) philosophy, they emphasized student-centered learning and critical thinking, positioning education as a tool for social change.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, while a landmark victory against segregation, had devastating consequences for Black educators. W. E. B. Du Bois (1960) predicted that "Negro teachers will become rare and in many cases disappear" (p. 195), a warning that proved accurate. White-controlled school boards often closed Black schools and dismissed Black teachers while retaining White teachers. Lash and Ratcliffe (2014) noted that "many African American educators were displaced, demoted, and dismissed from their careers as they knew them" (p. 327).

In 1950, approximately half of all Black professionals in the U.S. were teachers (Foster, 1996). However, after *Brown*, nearly 39,000 Black teachers lost their jobs between 1954 and 1965 as schools consolidated, closed, or actively excluded Black educators (Madkins, 2011). Furthermore, discriminatory certification tests erected additional barriers. Many experienced Black educators were forced into administrative positions with less influence, while others were pushed out of the education system altogether.

From the 1970s onward, Black teachers continued to face systemic barriers in education, and desegregation continued the decline in Black teacher representation. "The opening up of different occupations … allowed African Americans a broader choice of careers," leading to a

decrease in the number of Black teachers in schools (Lash & Ratcliffe, 2014, p. 328). Madkins

(2011) noted that in 2010, Black students made up 16% of the U.S. public school population, but

Black teachers accounted for only 8% of the teaching workforce, a clear disparity in

representation. As observed by Milner (2006), the loss of Black teachers meant the loss of their

unique pedagogical approaches, which had been instrumental in fostering academic and social

success among Black students. His research underscored that Black teachers did more than just

instruct: they provided mentorship, cultural affirmation, and advocacy that strengthened student

achievement (Milner, 2006).

Despite these challenges, Black educators who remain in teaching have been instrumental

in shaping culturally relevant pedagogy and advocating for policy changes. They have mentored

students of color and pushed for inclusive curricula that better reflect the experiences of African

Americans. Madkins (2011) emphasized that efforts to recruit and retain Black teachers have

been slow, even as the student population continues to grow more diverse. This decline

highlights the ongoing need for targeted recruitment and retention strategies to support diversity

in education.

Teacher Staffing, Equity, and Attrition

Few educational issues have garnered as much attention as ensuring that all elementary

and secondary classrooms are staffed with teachers. Many believe that U.S. schools are facing

significant teacher shortages. The education sector has issued repeated warnings like "the nation

will need to hire at least two million teachers over the next ten years" (National Commission on

Teaching, 1997, *The Need to Prepare and Keep Good Teachers* section) and teacher training

institutions are not producing sufficient numbers of teachers to meet the demand (Ingersoll,

2001). At the root of this school staffing crisis, according to conventional wisdom, are two

converging macro demographic trends: increasing student enrollment and increasing teacher

turnover due to a "graying" teaching force (Ingersoll, 2001). For instance, Ingersoll (2003) cited

that in 1990-91, of the 191,000 new hires, 174,000 pre-retired at a rate of 91%. Three years later,

of the 192,500 new hires, 213,000 left the occupation, representing 110% of new teachers

departing. The figures in Lindqvist's research on Swedish teachers differ from national statistics

of that same year (1998) that show a retention rate of 82% after 5 years, but the results differed

considerably from U.S. statistics (Ingersoll, 2001) that estimated retention rates as low as 54%

after 5 years (Lindqvist et al., 2014). Thus, the United States has had significant teacher attrition

for decades, especially compared to other developed nations.

More recently, data show that since 2017, the number of job openings in the education

sector has consistently outpaced hires, and the situation worsened during the COVID-19

pandemic (National Education Association, 2023). By 2023, 86% of public schools reported

difficulties filling teaching positions, with special education and general elementary teachers

being the most needed (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The primary barriers to

hiring were a lack of qualified candidates and too few applicants overall. Moreover, enrollment

in teacher preparation programs dropped by almost 38% between 2009 and 2016, contributing to

the shortage (Economic Policy Institute, 2019). The demand for qualified teachers, particularly

in specialized fields like special education and STEM, continues to grow, while the pool of new

teachers entering the profession has shrunk.

The proportion of Black teachers in the U.S. has remained relatively low. As of the 2020–

2021 school year, African American teachers made up about 6.1% of the total teaching

workforce (Black Teacher Collaborative, 2025). This included both men and women, with Black

women accounting for 4.8% and Black men representing just 1.3% of all public school teachers

(Black Teacher Collaborative, 2019). The percentage of Black male teachers has seen a

particular decline, dropping from 6.5% in 2017–2018 to 1.3% in 2020–2021 (USA Facts

Organization, 2023). African American teachers are somewhat more likely to work in diverse

areas and southern states, with 51% working in city schools and 66% in southern states (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2023). They are also more likely to teach in schools with

marginalized student populations: over 65% of Black teachers work in schools where at least

75% of the students are minorities (Black Teacher Collaborative, 2019).

Overall, teaching is a relatively large occupation, making up 2.5% of the entire U.S.

civilian workforce (Learning Policy Institute, 2025). While this may not seem like a large

percentage, for context, nurses make up 0.2% of the civilian workforce, which means the teacher

pool is almost 12 times larger than the most popular occupation in the health care sector (U.S.

Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). The size of the teaching force combined with its relatively

high annual turnover means that there are large flows in and out of schools each year (Ingersoll,

2007). In the 1999-2000 school year, 534,861 teachers entered schools, and by the following

school year a larger number, 539,778, had moved from or left their schools (Ingersoll, 2001).

Over a 12-month period in the late 1990s, more than 1 million teachers, nearly a third of this

sizable workforce, experienced job transitions. These statistics led to the use of the term

"revolving door" (Ingersoll, 2001) for the state of teacher employment in the United States.

Teacher shortages and recruitment initiatives are not new challenges for the K-12

education system. In the 1980s, a series of highly publicized reports trumpeted an almost

identical series of diagnoses and prescriptions to what we see today (National Commission on

Excellence in Education, 1983). Ingersoll (2003) attempted to provide a context for the widely

repeated 1990s statistic, introduced earlier, that the nation "will need to hire at least two million

teachers over the next 10 years" (National Commission on Teaching, 1997). This statistic was

drawn from an NCES analysis (Gerald & Hussar, 1998) projecting the numbers of teachers that

would need to be hired from 1998 to 2008 in order to replace those who had left teaching and to

account for student enrollment increases. The problem with this projection was that it did not

account for changes in societal and hiring needs. However, a wide variety of commentators,

researchers, and policy makers interpreted this statistic as evidence that an alarmingly inadequate

supply of new teachers was being produced to replace the ones leaving (Ingersoll, 2001).

Recent data from NCES (2023) shed more light on current attrition rates, teachers'

reasons for leaving, and their subsequent career paths. Data on teacher turnover during the 2020–

21 and 2021–22 school years come from the National Teacher and Principal Survey, which

surveyed a large representative sample of teachers and principals across public and private

schools in the United States. The survey provided comprehensive data on teacher mobility,

attrition, and working conditions, used to analyze the status of teachers as "stayers," "movers,"

or "leavers" (NCES, 2023). These data were collected directly, rather than relying on secondary

data sets. The survey included questions on a variety of topics, including reasons for leaving the

profession, moving to other schools, and demographic factors influencing mobility and retention.

During the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, 8% of public school teachers and 12% of

private school teachers exited the teaching profession (NCES, 2023). These attrition rates are

consistent with those recorded during the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school years, indicating a

persistent trend despite the unique challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concurrently, 84% of public school teachers and 82% of private school teachers remained at

their respective schools, while 8% of public and 6% of private school teachers transitioned to

different schools (NCES, 2023). This comes as a surprise, as public opinion on teaching and attrition, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been negative.

Understanding the reasons behind teacher attrition is crucial for developing effective retention strategies. For public school teachers, the primary reason for leaving was retirement, cited by 17% of teachers (NCES, 2023). Other significant factors included personal life reasons, such as health issues and childcare needs, mentioned by 13% of teachers, and the pursuit of different career opportunities, noted by 14% of the teachers surveyed (NCES, 2023). In contrast, private school teachers most frequently cited personal life reasons (24%), followed by retirement (13%) and the desire for other job opportunities (10%; NCES, 2023). A notable proportion of teachers left in search of higher salaries, with 9% of public and 11% of private school teachers identifying this as their main motivation for exiting the profession (NCES, 2023).

Rates of teacher attrition also varied based on the teachers' experience and the socioeconomic characteristics of the schools where they taught. Teachers with 3 or fewer years of experience had a higher tendency to change schools, with 13% moving to different schools compared to 6-8% of their more experienced counterparts (NCES, 2023). Furthermore, schools with lower percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch demonstrated slightly lower attrition rates than those with higher percentages of such students. This suggests that socioeconomic factors and associated school environments play a role in teacher attrition.

After leaving the classroom, many former teachers continued to contribute to the education field in various capacities. Among public school teachers who left, 39% secured education-related positions outside the traditional K-12 classroom setting (NCES, 2023). These roles often offered improved work-life balance, with 66% of former teachers reporting better personal and professional balance in their new positions (NCES, 2023). Additionally, 60% of

these teachers experienced greater autonomy, 58% found their workloads more manageable, and 58% perceived an increase in professional prestige (NCES, 2023).

These data on teacher attrition rates, reasons for leaving, and former teachers' new roles highlight the need for targeted policies and practices to address the underlying causes of teacher turnover. By addressing issues such as salary competitiveness, workload manageability, and support for personal life challenges, educational institutions can better support teachers and enhance retention (Penn State Center for Education and Policy Analysis, 2023). These efforts are crucial for maintaining a stable and experienced teaching workforce, which is essential for providing high-quality education (Penn State Center for Education and Policy Analysis, 2023).

Addressing teacher turnover necessitates a strategic focus on supporting teachers, especially those early in their careers and in low-socioeconomic-status areas. The high 2022-23 turnover rates highlighted in a recent analysis by ERS Strategies emphasize the urgency of the issue. For example, during the 2022-23 school year, 23% of teachers left their school or teaching role (ERS, 2024). The impact was even more pronounced in high-poverty schools, where turnover rates reached 29% between October 2022 and October 2023 (ERS, 2024). Additionally, 40% of teachers who transferred within their district moved to schools with fewer students living in poverty (ERS, 2024). This instability adds further challenges to success for students in high-poverty schools compared to their peers in more affluent areas. Addressing these disparities and implementing strategic support for teachers in high-poverty areas is crucial to ensuring educational equity and stability, ultimately enhancing the learning environment for all students.

Examining Systemic Inequalities in Education

CRT has become more popular in the education sector as more and more districts become increasingly culturally responsive in their curricula. This comes as positive news, considering

that "U.S. education, in policy and practice, has been accused of lacking a coherent theory of race or the necessary tools to overcome racial inequalities in academic achievement" (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 8). However, "the role of CRT in education scholarship has expanded significantly," supported by the growing number of sessions at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association that identify CRT as a descriptor (Ladson-billings & Tate, 2005, p. 117). The focus of CRT is to challenge traditional narratives by examining how educational institutions perpetuate racial inequalities in modern society.

Kohli and Pizarro (2022) explored how institutional racism operates within teacher preparation programs, specifically highlighting resistance from White teacher candidates toward sociopolitical issues such as race and oppression. They conducted qualitative interviews with 141 teacher candidates and teacher educators, with a particular emphasis on the perspectives of teachers of color. Teachers of color expressed frustration with how their expertise was devalued and how they faced systemic barriers that threatened their professional stability. The researchers concluded that "white teacher candidate resistance … is both condoned and structured by teacher education as programs disregard the expertise of teacher educators of color, impose limits on their roles, and allow for significant and ongoing threats to their professional stability" (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022, p. 7). This creates a particular problem in low-socioeconomic-status, marginalized areas, where teacher attrition is at its peak. Increasing the awareness of CRT within schools by providing professional development opportunities for teachers can help combat these rising numbers.

Systemic inequalities shaped by race and socioeconomic status create challenging working conditions for teachers in diverse community schools. These inequalities include underfunded schools, lack of support for teachers, and racially biased policies that

disproportionately affect African American teachers. Teacher education programs, which often lack sociopolitical analysis and predominantly reflect White, middle-class norms, fail to prepare teachers to address these challenges effectively (Amos, 2010; Gist, 2017). This disconnect can lead to frustration among teachers of color, who face racism and professional instability in environments where their expertise is undervalued (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). These factors might contribute to higher attrition rates, especially in low-income areas where teachers are already more likely to leave due to stress, lack of resources, and feeling unsupported.

Cheryl Harris (1993) described Whiteness in the United States as not just a racial identity, but as a form of property that confers privileges to White individuals. This concept can be applied to understand teacher attrition in diverse community schools, particularly when considering the dynamics of race, power, and privilege within the education system. As Renzulli et al. (2011) wrote, "The theories of organizational demography and racial prejudice that we draw from predict that racial mismatch leads to lower satisfaction and higher turnover regardless of how teachers come to teach in racially mismatched schools" (p. 23). They conducted a quantitative study of data from the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey, involving teachers from both traditional public schools and charter schools across the United States. The study examined how racial mismatch between teachers and students impacted job satisfaction and retention rates. Tools used included regression analysis and statistical models to evaluate satisfaction and turnover among participants, with a focus on racial composition and organizational context. Renzulli et al. found that African American teachers were more satisfied than White teachers teaching in White schools when they taught in majority Black schools. These findings suggested that teacher-student racial mismatch might lead to lower teacher satisfaction due to factors related to status composition, such as school quality.

While Harris's (1993) definition of "whiteness as property" can be easily identified, the usage of microaggressions in education can be much more subtle. Allen (2012) described microaggressions as "affect[ing] all marginalized groups and … felt through environmental cues as well as verbal and nonverbal hidden messages that serve to invalidate one's experiential reality and perpetuate feelings of inferiority" (p. 444). This has no place in the education system, as "the entity of school serves as an environment that often communicates cues to students about their capabilities, the importance of their contributions, and their expected life outcomes based on who they are" (Allen et al., 2013, p. 119). The same can be said about how African American teachers are treated by their colleagues and White counterparts. According to Sue et al. (2007), microaggressions are transmitted through subtle "snubs, dismissive looks, gestures, and tones" (p. 273). They can take the form of (a) microassaults (explicit racial derogation), (b) microinsults (actions that convey insensitivity and are belittling to a person's racial identity), and (c) microinvalidations (actions that negate or nullify a person of color's experiences or realities; Nadal, 2018). It is important to recognize and categorize microaggressions to understand how race affects teachers. In diverse education settings, microaggressions can significantly impact teachers, contributing to an inequitable environment.

Solorzano et al. (2000) asserted that CRT offers methods and pedagogies that can transform those structural and cultural components of education that "maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (p. 63). Raising awareness, using CRT as a springboard, can help create more advantageous and equitable situations for African American teachers, battling teacher attrition by giving leadership outlets to improve the quality of the work environment.

Racial privilege, as described by the concept of "whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993), and microaggressions, as defined by Allen (2013), contribute to unequal experiences for Black and White teachers in historically marginalized educational settings. Microaggressions can create a hostile environment for African American teachers, impacting their job satisfaction, professional development, and retention. In contrast, White teachers benefit from racial privilege, which shields them from these daily invalidations, leading to higher levels of job satisfaction and stability. This disparity in experiences between White and African American teachers contributes to the higher attrition rates among African American teachers, particularly in high needs schools, where these racial dynamics are often more pronounced.

The message of CRT within the context of African American teacher attrition and teaching in diverse school districts has largely been awareness. Black teachers make up just 7% of K–12 teachers nationally (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Serving in a predominantly White profession in schools fraught with racism, Black teachers often feel expected to represent their entire race, are pressured to continually prove they are qualified, and are overrelied upon for informal labor while neglected for formal leadership (Farinde et al., 2015). This should not be the case. African American teachers already have so much responsibility for guiding youth on their shoulders that they should not also have to be the sole voice in representation. The layers of racialized, gendered, and ideological marginalization Black educators experience can result in burnout, racial stress, and racial battle fatigue, where ongoing experiences with racial harm impact their socioemotional and physical well-being (Kohli, 2018). This can permanently push them out of the profession (Duncan, 2019; Kohli, 2018).

In the face of these struggles, professional development has been identified as a key mechanism for the survival, growth, and transformation of Black teachers within this

predominantly White profession (Mosely, 2018). Professional development can provide a space where the pedagogical needs of African American teachers are supported. Kohli et al. (2015) described professional development "designed to provoke cooperative dialogue, build unity, provide shared leadership, and meet the critical needs of teachers" (p. 11). When built upon models of community-based education, organizing efforts, and teacher inquiry groups (Rogers et al., 2009), professional development engages with teachers as critical intellectuals who play an important role in transforming schools and society (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020).

Diverse community schools are underfunded and understaffed, and may have harsh disciplinary policies that disproportionately affect culturally diverse learners (Crenshaw, 2002). These conditions reflect broader societal inequities, a point highlighted by CRT scholars such as Ladson-billings & Tate, Crenshaw, and Bell, who have argued that ethnically blind policies in education fail to address the root causes of racial disparities (Crenshaw, 2002). Teachers in these settings face significant challenges, such as larger class sizes, fewer resources, and higher levels of student trauma, which contribute to burnout and turnover (Brookings, 2023). The systemic neglect of these schools mirrors the broader patterns of racial inequality that CRT critiques.

CRT also challenges the meritocratic ideals often associated with educational policy, arguing that notions of success and failure in schools are often steeped in racial and class biases. Teachers in diverse schools are frequently evaluated using standardized tests and other metrics that do not account for the structural disadvantages their students face (Crenshaw, 2002). This narrow focus on test scores as a measure of both student and teacher success creates a high-pressure environment that, as previously stated, has driven African American teachers away by 6–10% in the New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut tri-state area (Education Resource Strategies, 2023).

Policy is often presented as a contest between high-profile antagonists. A critical race perspective highlights the necessity of taking a historically contextualized perspective (Gillborn, 2013). CRT in particular views policy not as a mechanism that delivers progressively greater degrees of equity, but a process that is shaped by the interests of the dominant White population: a situation where genuine progress is won through political protest and where apparent gains are quickly cut back (Gillborn, 2013).

There are two concepts coined by Derrick Bell that communicate CRT as policy in education. The first is "interest convergence," meaning that the rights of Black people only advance when they converge with the interests of White people. This can be seen in *Brown v. Board of Education,* where the Supreme Court's decision could be justified on the basis of "neutral" principles. To Bell, *Brown* arbitrarily traded the rights of Whites not to associate with Black people in favor of the rights of Blacks to associate with Whites. Bell (1980) suggested that no conflict of interest actually existed; for a brief period, the interests of the races converged to make the Brown decision inevitable. The second concept theorized by Bell is "contradiction-closing cases," which refers to shifts in policy that appear to address an obvious injustice. Contradiction-closing cases provide the solution when the gap grows too large between the liberal rhetoric of equal opportunities and the reality of racism (Delgado, 1995). These landmark cases appear to remove an inequality, but in reality little or nothing changes. Indeed, such cases are sometimes used as yet another weapon against further reform, because they "allow business as usual to go on even more smoothly than before, because now we can point to the exceptional case and say, 'See, our system is really fair and just. See what we just did for minorities or the poor'" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. 445). Essentially, they put a stopgap on the social justice issues in our education system.

Bell's concepts of interest convergence and contradiction-closing cases relate to teacher attrition by illustrating how educational policies may superficially address inequalities while masking deeper systemic issues. For instance, policies that appear to support teacher retention in high-poverty or predominantly diverse community schools may only be implemented when they align with broader political or economic interests. These policies often give the illusion of progress, but fail to address the root causes of teacher burnout, such as underfunding, lack of support, and racial inequities, leading to continued high attrition rates.

Social Learning Theory

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capability to succeed. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to persevere through challenges and less likely to leave the profession. Social learning theory suggests that self-efficacy can be bolstered through positive reinforcement and successful experiences, as well as by observing competent and confident peers (Cherry, 2024).

Furthermore, recent studies have explored the impact of social-emotional learning (SEL) on teacher attrition. SEL programs that focus on developing teachers' emotional intelligence, stress management, and interpersonal skills can improve resilience and job satisfaction. A quantitative study by Shawna M. Olney (2021) explored the relationship between statewide SEL standards and teacher attrition, retention, and self-efficacy in four Midwest states (Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska). The research found no significant differences in teacher retention, attrition, or self-efficacy between states with comprehensive SEL standards and those without. This suggests that simply having SEL standards in place may not be enough.

In contrast, other research on SEL interventions for teachers indicated that targeted SEL programs can enhance teachers' emotional intelligence, stress management, and classroom

management skills (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). These programs can decrease teachers'
psychological distress and burnout, while also improving job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Crain
et al., 2017; Domitrovich et al., 2016). A review in Frontier Psychology highlighted that such
interventions often address teachers' specific social and emotional competencies, which are
critical for managing classroom environments and promoting a healthier, more supportive
atmosphere for both teachers and students (Murray, 2018). When teachers have an easier time in
these areas, it may reduce attrition rates in diverse community schools.

The environment also plays a critical role in learning and behavior, according to social
learning theory. A supportive work environment where teachers feel valued, receive adequate
administrative support, and have opportunities for professional development can reduce feelings
of isolation and burnout (King, 2016). Such environments encourage positive social interactions
and observational learning, which are essential for teacher retention. Burnout can be mitigated by
observing peers who effectively manage their workload and maintain a healthy work-life
balance. Professional development programs that incorporate social learning principles can also
equip teachers with strategies to cope with stress and avoid burnout (Olney, 2021).

Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is particularly relevant in this context. Teachers with
high self-efficacy are more likely to overcome challenges and stay in the profession. Racial
microaggressions and systemic biases can undermine African American teachers' self-efficacy.
Strengthening self-efficacy through positive reinforcement, professional development, and
supportive networks can help retain these teachers (Cherry, 2024). SEL programs that address
emotional intelligence, stress management, and interpersonal skills can improve teachers'
resilience and job satisfaction (Olney, 2021). These programs are particularly beneficial in high-
stress environments, where African American teachers are often placed (Olney, 2021). By

fostering a supportive environment through an SEL-based curriculum, schools may help mitigate the factors that lead to burnout and attrition for African American teachers.

Social learning theory suggests that a positive and collaborative environment can enhance learning and professional development. Schools that provide adequate administrative support, recognize the unique contributions of African American teachers, and offer opportunities for professional growth can reduce feelings of isolation and burnout (Olney, 2021). African American teachers face systemic challenges including lower salaries, lack of professional respect, and inadequate support for handling student discipline and classroom management (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018). Addressing these systemic issues through policy changes, increased funding for teacher support programs, and targeted professional development can create a more equitable and supportive environment for African American teachers.

Integrating social learning theory into strategies for reducing African American teacher attrition can provide a robust framework for mentorship, enhancing self-efficacy, supporting SEL, and fostering supportive work environments (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett al., 2023). Addressing these factors holistically can help educational institutions retain African American teachers and create more stable and effective teaching environments.

Leadership in Education

Organizations rely on the collective efforts of many individuals. To a large extent, people's actions in society are also influenced by their involvement in formal organizations. These organizations have leaders and defined goals to achieve through the cooperative efforts of their members. Often, organizations fail when their leaders are of low caliber, there is a lack of teamwork, or their objectives do not align with what is necessary and beneficial for society.

In schools, the emphasis on principal as leader may have added a new dimension to the traditional distinction between the dual roles of principal as educator and principal as administrator (Farahbakhsh, 2006). Early American schools had principal teachers who were elected, but the position has now evolved towards greater attention to administrative matters (Boyer, 1983). A manager can be appointed, but leadership must be earned, even after appointment to a managerial position. Leadership is not a position in an organization, but an active, influencing force. Leadership is not based on position or status, but on authority and prestige. Leadership may come from personal enthusiasm, personal authority, credibility, knowledge, skill, or charisma; it is derived from influence that the leader has over followers (Darling, 1992). The tone of a school is mainly influenced by the behavior and personality of the principal, which affect the attitude, climate, progress, cooperation, and direction of efforts in the school. In fact, the principal is the hub around which the educational activities revolve (Farahbakhsh, 2006). In diverse community schools, where challenges such as high student needs, limited resources, and socioeconomic factors are more prevalent, the impact of leadership is even more pronounced. Strong, supportive leadership can mitigate some of these challenges by creating a positive, resilient school culture, thereby reducing teacher attrition.

The nature of leadership, especially within the realm of education, has evolved significantly, with today's school leaders adopting more nuanced and contemporary approaches. McGregor (1978) defined leadership as inducing followers to act toward certain goals that represent the values and motives, wants and needs, and aspirations and expectations of both leaders and followers. Leadership is intrinsically linked to the needs and goals of followers, as it inherently takes place within a group context. Therefore, this term refers to leadership behavior in a group rather than to any sets of traits or personal attributes (Farahbakhsh, 2006). Lipham

(1974) described leadership as the behavior of an individual that initiates a new structure in interaction within a social system; it initiates change in the goals, objectives, or configuration of the social system. Leadership is dynamic because it involves social systems in action and interaction (Farahbakhsh, 2006). Leadership is commonly defined as the process of influencing others in a manner that enhances their contribution to the realization of group goals (Hollander, 1995). This is generally recognized as the positive influence of one individual on the behavior of many others, and often regarded as essential for the effectiveness and efficiency of organizations. It can also be defined as the process of influencing and supporting others to work enthusiastically toward achieving objectives (Keys & Case, 1990). Effective leadership, defined as influencing and supporting teachers to work enthusiastically toward achieving objectives, may mitigate teacher attrition by creating a supportive, motivating environment that enhances job satisfaction and professional fulfillment.

Gist's 2017 qualitative study focused on the cultural mismatch between African American teachers and their predominantly White colleagues in diverse community school districts. The research was conducted through interviews, focus groups, and open-ended surveys to collect narrative data. Gist then conducted a thematic analysis to identify patterns in the experiences of African American teachers. The research highlighted the feelings of isolation and lack of belonging that many African American teachers experience due to systemic challenges such as microaggressions and inadequate leadership support. This cultural mismatch presents a leadership challenge, as leadership plays a critical role in either mitigating or exacerbating these issues. When school leaders fail to provide adequate support, whether through mentorship, addressing microaggressions, or creating an inclusive school culture, African American teachers may experience burnout and attrition (Gist, 2018). Without effective leadership that recognizes

and addresses these cultural and racial dynamics, teacher turnover in marginalized districts will

likely remain high, particularly among African American teachers (Gist, 2018).

Transformational leadership can mitigate teacher attrition by inspiring and empowering

educators through visionary guidance, individualized support, intellectual stimulation, emotional

encouragement, and shared leadership practices. Transformational leadership distinguishes itself

from other leadership theories on the basis of its alignment with a greater good, as it entails

involvement of the followers in processes or activities that will yield certain superior social

dividends (Nawaz & Khan, 2016). Transformational leaders raise the motivation and morality of

both the follower and the leader (House & Shamir, 1993). The leader focuses on followers'

needs and input in order to transform everyone into a leader by empowering and motivating them

(House & Aditya, 1997). The ethical extent of leadership further differentiates transformational

leadership (Nawaz & Khan, 2016). Transformational leaders identify the need for change, gain

the agreement and commitment of others, create a vision that guides change, and embed the

change (Bums, 2003). These leaders engage with their subordinates individually, aiming to

cultivate their awareness, morals, and skills by emphasizing the significance of their work and

providing challenges. They present a compelling and inspiring vision of the future. They are

"visionary leaders who seek to appeal to their followers" better nature and move them toward

higher and more universal needs and purposes" (MacGregor & Bums, 2003, p. 24).

Transformational leadership in education not only addresses teacher attrition by fostering

empowerment and inspiration, but also distinguishes itself through its ethical foundation,

visionary approach, and commitment to developing both leaders and followers.

Transformational leadership links with positive outcomes on individual as well as

organizational levels. Transformational leaders embolden followers to attain higher-order needs

like self-actualization and self-esteem, and motivate them in the direction of "self-sacrifice and achievement of organizational goals over personal interests" (Bass, 1995, p. 1208). Leaders with Idealized Influence demonstrate heightened concerns and cognizance of followers' needs and generate a sense of shared risk-taking. This dimension of transformational leadership is sometimes broken down into two parts based on whether the idealized influence is an attribution of the leader or a behavior (Antonakis et al., 2003). Attributed idealized influence is thought of in terms of a leader's level of charisma, their personal ethics and ideals, and whether they come across as powerful and confident (Stepanek & Paul, 2022). Idealized influence as a behavior is defined in terms of whether the leader behaves in a charismatic manner and takes actions based on their values and beliefs (Stepanek & Paul, 2022). Leaders displaying idealized influence are often seen as role models in the workplace due to the integrity of their actions and their desire to put their followers' needs before their own (Bass et al., 2003). In short, fundamental pointers of idealized influence are role-modeling, articulation, and values-creation, which provide a sense of purpose, meaning, self-esteem, self-determination, emotional control, and confidence in followers (Nawaz & Khan, 2016).

Leaders with characteristics of intellectual stimulation are those who "intellectually stimulate followers, engender creativity and accept challenges as part of their job" (Nawaz & Khan, 2016, p. 2). Leaders demonstrate intellectual stimulation by encouraging followers to achieve greater levels of creativity and innovation. To do so, they may question existing assumptions, reframe problems so they can be seen in a different light, and find new ways of going about existing tasks (Bass et al., 2003). These leaders create a psychologically safe work environment where followers are free to make mistakes and openly share ideas without facing ridicule (Stepanek & Paul, 2022). Primary aspects of intellectual stimulation include rationality,

creativity, consensus decision-making, coaching, support, challenge, and active engagement. Leaders who foster intellectual stimulation through creativity, innovation, and a supportive work environment not only enhance organizational performance, but also contribute to reducing teacher attrition by empowering educators and fostering a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration.

Individualized consideration in transformational leadership involves recognizing each person as a crucial contributor to the workplace. These leaders show concern for their employees' needs and are skilled at encouraging and coaching the development of desired workplace behaviors. Their leadership style varies: they may adopt a participatory approach where they actively involve employees in decision-making and collaboration, or may shift to an autocratic approach where they make decisions unilaterally and maintain strict control. In essence, "fundamental elements of individualized consideration consist of reassurance, caring for and coaching of individuals and an open and consultative approach" (Nawaz & Khan, 2016, p. 4). Leaders who display individualized consideration pay attention to each of their followers' specific needs and act as mentors to advise and support their endeavors (Antonakis et al., 2003). They may provide growth opportunities tailored to each individual and create a supportive environment to try these opportunities out (Bass et al., 2003).

Servant leadership is another leadership style that has seen significant development, particularly in its application within modern organizational settings. It can have positive effects on both individual and organizational outcomes (Ding et al., 2012). Servant leadership places the needs of followers at the forefront. This is achieved through the cultivation of traits such as authenticity, humility, and compassion. Authenticity in servant leadership involves a commitment to transparency and honesty, where leaders align their actions with their values,

creating an environment of trust and integrity within the organization (Liden et al., 2014; Van

Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2015). Humility refers to a leader's ability to remain grounded, open to

feedback, and willing to place the needs of others before their own ambitions (Ding et al., 2012).

These traits foster a supportive environment where followers feel valued and empowered,

leading to higher levels of engagement and commitment.

  The competencies of servant leadership further reinforce its focus on the development

and empowerment of followers. Empowerment is demonstrated through the delegation of

authority and the provision of resources and support that enable followers to achieve their full

potential (Liden et al., 2015). This approach enhances individual performance and encourages

innovation and creativity, as followers are given the autonomy to explore new ideas and

solutions (Chen et al., 2015). Building strong, trust-based relationships is also integral to servant

leadership, as it allows leaders to understand the unique needs and strengths of their followers,

thus enabling personalized support and development (Sendjaya et al., 2019).

  Schools led by servant leaders tend to exhibit higher levels of student success, reduced

employee turnover, and enhanced overall performance (Schwepker & Schultz, 2015). This is

largely because servant leaders create an organizational culture that prioritizes service, both

internally among employees and externally toward students. The emphasis on ethical behavior

and the creation of a positive, inclusive work environment also contribute to a stronger

organizational reputation and greater long-term success (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015).

  In practice, servant leadership has been linked to a range of positive outcomes, including

improved job satisfaction, increased organizational citizenship behavior, and greater employee

well-being (Liden et al., 2014). These outcomes are particularly important in today's complex

and dynamic work environments, where the ability to retain talented employees and foster a

collaborative, innovative culture is crucial for sustained success. Moreover, servant leadership's focus on ethical behavior and social responsibility aligns well with the increasing demand for organizational accountability and transparency (Schwepker & Schultz, 2015). As organizations strive to balance success with purpose, servant leadership integrates these goals by promoting practices that benefit not only the organization but also its employees and the wider community (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015).

Servant leadership has become increasingly significant in the field of education, where the focus on nurturing students and staff aligns with the core principles of this leadership style. Servant leaders prioritize the well-being and development of individuals within the educational community, fostering an environment where students and teachers alike can thrive. This approach has been shown to enhance both teacher effectiveness and student outcomes, creating a more supportive and productive learning environment (Schroeder, 2016).

A key element of servant leadership in education is deep respect for and value placed on every member of the educational community. Servant leaders are committed to treating all individuals with respect and equality, which helps to create a unified and inclusive culture within schools and universities. This respect encourages open communication and allows students to feel safe and valued, promoting greater engagement and motivation to achieve their full potential (Schroeder, 2016). When students are respected and their voices are heard, they are more likely to invest in their own learning and contribute positively to the classroom environment.

Ethical behavior, as mentioned previously, is another cornerstone of servant leadership, particularly within educational settings, where leaders serve as role models for both students and staff. Servant leaders consistently demonstrate integrity, transparency, and accountability in their actions, which builds trust and instills these values in students (Cerit, 2009). The ethical

standards modeled by servant leaders are essential for developing students' moral and ethical

decision-making skills, preparing them to be responsible and ethical leaders in the future

(Schroeder, 2016).

   The dynamic nature of the educational landscape requires servant leaders to balance

focus with flexibility. In today's rapidly changing world, educational leaders must be adaptable,

able to respond to the evolving needs of their students, and willing to adjust their teaching

methods to better support student learning (Crippen, 2010). This flexibility was particularly

critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many institutions to transition to online

learning environments. Servant leaders who maintained their focus on student needs while

adapting to new teaching modalities were more successful in sustaining student engagement and

achievement during this challenging time (Keiser University, 2023).

   Building a sense of community is another aspect of servant leadership in education.

Servant leaders create strong, supportive relationships within the educational community,

fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support among students and staff (Crippen, 2010).

This community building extends beyond the classroom, as servant leaders often engage with

local community members to form partnerships that benefit students and the district (Schroeder,

2016). These relationships can provide students with valuable real-world experiences, such as

internships, class trips, and service-learning opportunities, that enhance their education and

prepare them for their future careers (Keiser University, 2023). Thus, the principles of servant

leadership not only contribute to a positive and supportive institutional culture, but improve the

educational experience for students.

   The connection between servant leadership and teacher retention has gained attention as

educational leaders explore strategies to address the challenge of retaining teachers. The primary

way servant leadership can promote teacher retention is by improving job satisfaction. Gotsis and

Grimani (2016) found a positive correlation between the application of servant leadership

principles and work satisfaction among teachers. Their study employed a theoretical and

conceptual approach, using a quantitative methodology to develop and test a model capturing the

effect of servant leadership in shaping climates for inclusion (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Their

statistical model showed that inclusive practices played a significant role in the relationship

between servant leadership and organizational outcomes. These inclusive practices addressed

employee needs for belongingness, thereby enhancing job satisfaction and reducing the

likelihood of turnover. The study also discussed how the servant leader's belief in inclusiveness

moderated the relationship between leadership practices and positive teacher outcomes. The

findings suggest that when school leaders adopt servant leadership traits, such as prioritizing the

well-being of teachers and supporting their professional growth, teachers experience higher

levels of job satisfaction, which is directly linked to lower attrition rates (Gotsis & Grimani,

2016).

Culver (2023) explored the impact of servant leadership on teacher retention, focusing

specifically on beginning teachers, who are at higher risk of leaving the profession early in their

careers. They found that school principals who employed servant leadership practices, such as

being accessible, offering meaningful feedback, and fostering a sense of belonging, had a

significant positive impact on the retention of novice teachers. Beginning teachers in

environments where these leadership traits were prevalent reported higher job satisfaction and a

stronger sense of support, leading to reduced attrition. A key finding in Culver's research was

that servant leadership, particularly the dimension of empowerment, was the most effective in

retaining teachers. The study was conducted using quantitative methods, collecting data from over 1,000 teachers in a K-12 public school system (Culver, 2023). The results show the importance of servant leadership in creating a positive and nurturing environment that can help retain teachers who might otherwise leave the profession due to lack of support.

In addition to enhancing job satisfaction, servant leadership has also been shown to buffer teachers against the stressors that contribute to burnout, a major factor in teacher attrition. Callahan (2014) gathered data through surveys administered to a sample of teachers and explored how servant leadership could mitigate the effects of stressors by creating a supportive and understanding environment where teachers feel valued and appreciated. Callahan emphasized that the stress of teaching, especially for new teachers, can be overwhelming. However, when school leaders practice servant leadership by being empathetic, providing emotional support, and fostering a collaborative community, the impact of stressors is reduced, making it more likely that teachers will remain in their positions (Callahan, 2014). A supportive environment is crucial in helping teachers manage the inherent challenges of the profession, and reduces the risk of burnout and attrition.

The current study is critically important because it addresses the significant issue of African American teacher attrition within diverse K-8 school districts. African American teachers play a vital role in fostering an inclusive educational environment, especially for students of color, who benefit from seeing teachers who reflect their cultural and racial backgrounds. High attrition rates of African American teachers deprive students of crucial role models and exacerbate inequities within the educational system. Although teacher attrition is a widely studied topic, there is relatively limited research focused on the experiences and challenges faced by African American educators. Existing studies by NCES (2023) and Penn

State University examined general teacher attrition, but failed to adequately explore the racial and cultural factors that influence African American teachers' decisions to leave the profession.

Other studies have also examined transformational and servant leadership, but the connection between these styles and reducing African American teacher attrition is underexplored. This study aimed to fill that gap by examining how leadership practices within schools, particularly those that foster inclusivity, support, and professional development, can mitigate the factors that drive African American teachers to leave the profession.

This study is needed to provide more nuanced insights into the systemic barriers faced by African American educators and to explore leadership-based strategies that can address these challenges. By contributing new knowledge to the literature, the research can help produce practical solutions for educational leaders, ultimately improving teacher retention rates and enhancing educational equity.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

The attrition of African American teachers is not merely a workforce issue—it is a systemic failure that undermines educational equity, particularly in diverse K-8 schools. Despite ongoing recruitment efforts, retention remains a persistent challenge, as Black teachers continue to leave the profession at disproportionate rates due to racial stress (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022), unsupportive school climates (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011), and a lack of leadership advocacy (Ladson-billings & Tate, 1995). These departures have far-reaching consequences, as research has shown that Black students benefit academically, socially, and emotionally when they are taught by Black educators (Milner, 2006). The loss of these teachers disrupts school stability and deepens racial disparities in student achievement, discipline, and graduation rates (Madkins, 2011).

While leadership has been identified as a key factor in teacher retention (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006), existing research has yet to fully examine how specific leadership styles impact the retention of African American educators in diverse, high-need schools. This study addressed that gap by applying transformational and servant leadership as theoretical frameworks to analyze the role of school leaders in shaping retention outcomes. Transformational leaders create vision-driven, inclusive school climates that empower teachers through mentorship and advocacy (Bass & Avolio, 2004), while servant leadership emphasizes emotional support, professional growth, and shared decision-making—all of which are critical in fostering a work environment where African American educators feel valued and supported (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021).

However, leadership alone cannot solve this issue. Without targeted policy reforms (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011), culturally responsive mentorship programs (Gay, 2018), and systemic efforts to combat institutional barriers (Crenshaw et al., 1995), Black teachers will continue to leave the profession at alarming rates. This study sought to provide evidence-based recommendations on how leadership practices, school policies, and institutional supports can be strategically aligned to improve retention. By exploring the lived experiences of African American teachers in diverse K-8 schools, this research offers actionable insights for educational leaders and policymakers committed to building a more diverse, stable, and equitable teaching workforce.

Ultimately, addressing Black teacher attrition is a critical step toward dismantling racial inequities in education. A more diverse and better supported teaching force benefits all students, particularly Black students, who thrive when they see themselves reflected in their educators, experience culturally relevant teaching, and have their identities affirmed (Ladson-billings & Tate, 1995). This study contributes to the broader conversation on how leadership, policy, and

systemic change must work together to create sustainable solutions for African American teacher

retention.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

African American teacher attrition impacts both the profession's diversity and the educational experiences of students, particularly those from marginalized communities. The departure of these educators deprives students, especially those from similar racial and cultural backgrounds, of role models who can understand and address their unique needs and challenges. This loss of representation can lead to a less inclusive and supportive educational environment, which may affect students' academic performance, social development, and overall school experience.

The presence of African American teachers in schools has been shown to benefit all students, promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity among the broader student population. For African American students, in particular, having teachers who share their cultural background can enhance their sense of belonging and academic self-concept, contributing to better educational outcomes (NCES, 2023). Despite these benefits, African American teachers face numerous challenges that contribute to higher attrition rates compared to their counterparts.

This qualitative research study explored the reasons behind the departure of African American educators from the teaching profession. Factors such as systemic racism, lack of support from administration, feelings of isolation, limited opportunities for professional growth, and the emotional toll of addressing racial disparities within the classroom are significant contributors to attrition. The study sought to shed light on these and other specific experiences and obstacles that African American teachers encounter in their professional lives.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study investigated the multifaceted issue of African American teachers leaving the teaching profession and explored different strategies that educational leaders and administrators can employ to bolster retention of African American educators. This study recognized the importance of understanding the unique challenges African American teachers encounter daily, pertaining to cultural identity, classroom dynamics, career advancement, and the impact of racial and cultural factors on job satisfaction. The research sought to offer insights into effective strategies that educational leaders can implement to create inclusive learning environments and provide decision-makers with data to address teacher attrition. This will enhance the quality of education for all students, especially those from marginalized communities.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following question: How do the experiences and perspectives of African American teachers influence their decisions to stay or leave the teaching profession in diverse K-8 schools?

The study used a qualitative approach to gather data on subjective experiences, perceptions, and underlying factors that contributed to African American teachers' decision to leave the profession. The primary measure for answering this question was the narratives and personal experiences of the teachers. Secondary measures included factors influencing the decision to leave and any common themes or patterns that emerged from the interview process. The qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis, which involved the systematic identification, coding, and interpretation of recurring themes, patterns, and narratives in the interview transcripts.

The Researcher

As a white male, I recognize that I cannot fully grasp the unique experiences of African American educators. However, my background teaching in diverse K-8 settings in New Jersey sparked an interest in studying teacher attrition, particularly among underrepresented teachers. I acknowledge that African American educators face systemic challenges that I have not personally encountered. I approached this research with humility, centering their voices and ensuring their experiences guided the findings. By reflecting on my own privilege, I aim to contribute to creating more equitable educational environments.

Participant Recruitment and Selection Process

Participants were recruited through social media using the platforms LinkedIn and X, previously known as Twitter. Additionally, I contacted schools, school districts, and higher education programs via email to inquire about employees who fit the inclusion criteria. Snowball sampling was also utilized and allowed for participants to refer additional participants. The final participant pool included 10 African American teachers who were currently teaching or had taught in New Jersey, New York, or Connecticut tri-state area schools.

Participant Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

To be included in this study, teachers had to identify as Black or African American and be working, or have worked, in a K-8 New Jersey, New York, or Connecticut tri-state area school. Participants also had to have taught within a diverse-qualifying school district over the past 10 years. Participants were excluded if they had not taught within the selected region, had not taught in the past 10 years, did not identify as African American, or did not teach at a qualifying school.

Researcher-Participant Relationships

All participants were intentionally selected to ensure they had no personal or professional relationships with me, thereby eliminating potential conflicts of interest. Specifically, teachers from my own district were ineligible to participate, as the district did not fit the demographic for the study. These measures were taken to uphold the integrity and impartiality of the study, ensuring that findings were based solely on objective analysis and participant experiences.

Ethical Standards and Institutional Review Board Approval

As participant confidentiality was critical in this study, names were withheld and identities anonymized. Likewise, school district names were kept confidential. Participants were categorized as "teachers" in both the thematic analysis and study publications. Only details such as grade level and other relevant teacher attrition information were disclosed, maintaining the integrity of the research while respecting participant privacy.

This study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of William Paterson University and approved, adhering to all guidelines. Any additional edits were sent to the IRB for review before proceeding with the study.

<div align="center">

Research Instruments

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A semistructured interview guide (see Appendices A and B) served as the primary research instrument to explore factors contributing to African American teacher attrition within K-8 school districts in the New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut tri-state area. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed, reflective responses from participants, focusing on their subjective experiences, perceptions, and specific challenges. Different sets of questions were used for teachers still in the profession and teachers who had already left the profession.

Data Collection

Individual semistructured interviews were conducted either in person or virtually, depending on the participant's preference and availability, with the aim of fostering an open and comfortable dialogue. In-person interviews were held on the William Paterson University campus or at public libraries. For virtual interviews, platforms like Zoom or Google Meet were utilized, ensuring accessibility for all participants.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis. The semistructured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling me to probe deeper into specific areas as needed while maintaining a consistent framework across all interviews.

The interview questions for this study were carefully structured to align with the study's theoretical framework, drawing from CRT, social learning theory, and transformational leadership. These theoretical lenses informed both the formulation of questions and the subsequent analysis of data, ensuring that the study remained focused on uncovering the unique experiences of African American teachers in diverse K-8 settings. By integrating these frameworks, the study aimed to explore how systemic factors, observational learning, and leadership dynamics influenced African American teachers' decisions to stay in or leave the profession.

Consent

This study used a thorough and transparent consent procedure. Before their involvement, potential participants received information about the study's purpose, procedure, and potential risks/benefits. Participants were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation, emphasizing their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Confidentiality measures

were thoroughly explained, assuring participants that their responses would be anonymous and stored securely. The consent procedure aligned with ethical guidelines prioritizing participant autonomy, privacy, and overall comfort. Consent was granted through a waiver signed by each participant prior to the interview.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, a methodical process involving several stages. Initially, interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and reviewed to ensure familiarity with the content. The analysis began with identifying significant statements or segments pertaining to reasons for leaving teaching. These statements were then organized into themes, linking related information together to explore recurring patterns across participants. Through selective analysis, the themes were refined and finalized.

The data analysis for this study was also guided by the theoretical frameworks of CRT, social learning theory, and transformational leadership. The goal was to identify key themes around factors that influenced these teachers' decisions regarding retention and attrition. The generated themes were carefully defined and named, supported by quotes from the interview transcripts to capture the essence of participants' experiences. The interpretation of these findings involved contextualizing themes within the literature review on teacher attrition and racial dynamics in education. This process aimed to provide insights into the many factors influencing African American teachers' decisions to leave teaching.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the qualitative findings arising from this study on African American teacher attrition in diverse K–8 schools. In Chapter 3, the methodological framework was detailed, describing the research design, participant selection strategies, and data collection procedures. Specifically, semistructured interviews with African American educators were the primary data source, supplemented by observational notes and relevant background information. The focus here shifts from describing the process to spotlighting the teachers' voices themselves, foregrounding their lived experiences and perspectives in the classroom.

These educators worked in marginalized school districts that often grappled with limited resources, high turnover rates, and complex racial dynamics. Their reflections expressed how factors such as leadership practices, school culture, and institutional support structures shaped whether they remained committed to the profession or considered leaving. By zeroing in on the complications of their day-to-day experiences, the reported findings in this chapter yield insights that go beyond statistical trends, revealing motivations, frustrations, and coping strategies.

Thematic analysis was the central tool to examine interview data. Initial open coding identified concepts shared across participants like "lack of administrative support," "cultural isolation," and "desire to mentor African American students." Subsequent rounds of focused coding helped refine these open codes into categories and, ultimately, key themes. These themes are presented in the sections that follow, each accompanied by selected participant quotes that demonstrate the variety and depth of each teacher's experience.

One of the primary objectives of this study was to understand how leadership influenced teacher satisfaction. This involved looking at specific leadership styles, such as transformational and servant leadership, and examining how they appeared within these teachers' schools. Another central concern was teacher identity: given that all participants identified as African American, the data shed light on the interplay of race, institutional culture, and workplace dynamics. Teachers discussed microaggressions, assumptions about their roles, and the unique pressures of being among a small minority of African American educators. They also described positive experiences, from supportive mentoring relationships to administrators who actively foster cultural responsiveness and professional growth.

In addition, teachers shared their reasons to stay or leave, revealing a complex web of personal dedication, professional aspirations, and external stressors. Some participants reported the desire to serve as role models for African American children in diverse districts, while others described feeling "burnt out" by the constant challenges of inadequate funding, work overload, and racial bias. Throughout this chapter, these tensions are explored in context, showing how teacher attrition is rarely driven by a single issue, but rather by a convergence of personal and institutional factors.

By combining participants' narratives and the broader theoretical lens from Chapter 2, this chapter provides a rich, multifaceted depiction of African American teachers' professional realities. The themes identified in the data form the foundation for Chapter 5, where the discussion and analysis connect these findings back to the research questions, policy implications, and the existing body of literature. The study aimed to offer actionable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and teacher education programs to strengthen retention efforts,

improve job satisfaction, and address structural barriers that African American educators encounter in diverse K–8 schools.

Restatement of Research Question

This study sought to answer the following central research question: How do the experiences and perspectives of African American teachers influence their decisions to stay or leave the teaching profession in diverse K–8 schools?

Understanding the professional realities of African American educators in K–8 settings, particularly within diverse community schools and often under-resourced districts, is essential to addressing issues of teacher attrition and educational equity. This research question guided the development of interview protocols and informed the thematic coding and findings presented in this chapter.

Overview of Participants

Table 1 provides a summary of demographic data for the study's 10 participants, all of whom were African American educators currently or previously working in diverse K–8 schools across the New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut tri-state area. Each participant had a unique combination of experience, certification, and subject expertise. This enriched the data and helped describe the broader landscape of African American teacher experiences, particularly in high-need school settings. The table lists total years of teaching experience, subject areas taught, grade levels served, and relevant certifications or degrees. These details provide important context for understanding the themes presented in this chapter.

Table 1

Professional Overview of Study Participants

Participant ID	Years of experience	Subjects taught	Grade levels	Certifications and education	Gender
Participant A	29	Science	K-8	K-8 Cert, Supervisor Certification, MA Education	Female
Participant B	10	ELA	8	BA English, MA Literature	Female
Participant C	25	Math, Science, SS, ELA	K-8	Special Ed K-12 Certification	Male
Participant D	13	Math and Science	4–6	BA/MA, Supervisor Certification	Female
Participant E	5	ELA	8	Alternate Route, BA Elementary Education, MA Ed Leadership	Female
Participant F	13	Math and Science	4–6	BA Elementary Education, MA Ed Tech	Female
Participant G	24	ESL, Math, Science, LLD	K-8	BA Elementary Education, ESL	Male
Participant H	12	Math	3-6	BA Math, Supervisor	Female
Participant I	16	Science, SS	6-8	BA English and Elementary Ed	Female
Participant J	21	LLD	K-8	BA Elementary and Special Education	Male

Note. ELA = English language arts, ESL = English as a second language, LLD = learning and language disabilities, SS = social studies.

Thematic Findings

Through detailed coding and analysis, several key themes emerged that reflected the lived experiences of African American educators working in diverse K–8 school settings. These themes captured the challenges and coping strategies identified by participants. Table 2 lists the core themes, the participants who contributed to each theme, and sample quotes that illustrate each theme. The themes are explored in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Table 2

Overview of Emergent Themes and Participant Quotes

Theme	Participants	Description	Representative quote
Lack of Administrative Support	A, B, C, D, F, G	Participants described feeling unsupported by school leadership in terms of both resources and professional respect.	"You come in with ideas about how you want to change kids' lives, but you don't get the support."—Participant A
Mentorship and Peer Networks	A, B, C, D, E, J	Many relied on informal support systems when formal mentorship was lacking, often through community, fraternities, or peer relationships.	"I didn't have a formal mentor, but I had people who poured into me … people who had walked in my shoes."—Participant D
Burnout and Emotional Drain	A, B, C, D, E, F, G	Chronic exhaustion from paperwork, classroom management, and emotional labor was frequently reported.	"I'd be physically and mentally, emotionally exhausted—like drained."—Participant B
Toxic School Climate	B, C, D, E, F, G	Described school cultures as distrustful, unsupportive, or hostile, contributing to emotional strain and disengagement.	"It was like I was walking on eggshells every day."—Participant D
Representation and Isolation	A, C, D, E, F	Teachers reflected on being one of few Black educators in their schools, leading to feelings of isolation and marginalization.	"I'm the only African American teacher in the building."—Participant A
Bias and Discrimination	B, C, F	Teachers shared experiences with subtle and overt bias related to race, background, or cultural identity.	"You're a learner of English, how can you teach English?"—Participant B

Theme 1: Lack of Administrative Support

One theme that surfaced across participant interviews was the consistent lack of administrative support in the schools where these African American educators worked. Teachers described environments where leadership was either physically absent, emotionally disengaged, or dismissive of teacher input, conditions that made them feel invisible, overwhelmed, or professionally stagnant. While the missing forms of support ranged from feedback and mentorship to disciplinary backing and resource access, the consequences were very similar: high stress, emotional burnout, and serious contemplation of leaving the profession.

Participant A, a veteran educator with nearly 30 years of experience, spoke about how this lack of support shaped their repeated desire to leave. "I want to leave often," the teacher said. "You come in with these ideas about how you want to change kids' lives, but you don't get the support. Especially in urban areas, you're just constantly under-supported." This teacher emphasized that the lack of support was not limited to materials or training, but extended to emotional and professional validation. "There's no one to talk to about it. You go to a principal or supervisor, and they say, 'Well, we're struggling too.'"

Six participants described a persistent expectation to perform under intense pressure without adequate resources or support. They shared that despite being held to high standards, they often lacked the tools, materials, and backing to meet those expectations. For many, especially those working in urban schools, this disconnect between responsibility and support created ongoing frustration and contributed to feelings of burnout and professional fatigue.

Participant B offered similar sentiments, particularly about administrative visibility and climate. "The only support we get is from the vice principal. The principal is never to be seen," the teacher shared. For this participant, the absence of the school's primary leader made the

culture feel fractured and demoralizing. "She [the principal] doesn't know her staff ... and that's why the climate and culture is so toxic." The presence and cultural responsiveness of school leaders play a pivotal role in African American teacher retention. Participant B expressed that if the principal failed to engage authentically with their staff, especially with educators of color, the sense of professional belonging deteriorated.

Participant D reflected on a toxic atmosphere created by administrative neglect and surveillance. "It didn't feel like a nurturing environment ... it felt like you were walking on eggshells." The teacher recalled moments when administrators would "sneak around" and "watch" for missteps rather than foster a culture of development. Participant C noted, "How can you nurture young minds when you, as the teacher, aren't even being nurtured?" Participants shared that a lack of trust and autonomy in their school environments contributed to their thoughts of leaving the profession. They described feeling micromanaged, undervalued, or excluded from important decisions, which made it difficult to remain committed to their roles long-term.

Participant D, who had been consistently rated as "proficient" by administrators, described the other side of the spectrum: a lack of engagement after being labeled as competent. "If they think you're good, they just leave you alone," the teacher said. "But that doesn't mean you're supported." This participant wanted administrative support to go beyond compliance and evaluation to involve relationship building, mentorship, and active professional development. However, many administrators were "too busy" and pushed mentoring responsibilities onto other teachers. "It's like, go find someone else to help you. And new teachers? They drown."

Six participants described a sense of professional neglect. Participant B, a veteran educator, said that while they had been fortunate to find guidance through a fraternity's

mentorship network, not everyone had access to such external support: "I've had mentors who were older than me from my frat ... they helped me stay grounded. But I know a lot of teachers who don't have that. They're out here by themselves." Peer and community mentorship outside of the school system played a significant role in helping Participant E remain in the profession. These mentorship networks, often rooted in shared identity and experience, provided guidance, encouragement, and a sense of belonging that school-based support structures often lacked.

Participant F offered one of the most vivid accounts of how administrative politics and favoritism can drive feelings of marginalization. Despite qualifications and experience, this teacher was passed over for a leadership role in favor of a White candidate brought in from another district. "They didn't even interview any of us," the teacher said. "We were already in the system, we applied, and they just gave it to someone else. The panel was all White." Participant F later learned, through a confidential conversation, that the hiring decision had been influenced by personal relationships and a desire to "bring in someone fresh." The experience left them feeling undervalued and professionally stuck. "It made me start looking elsewhere. I just don't feel like I can grow here."

Multiple participants described being passed over for leadership roles or coaching opportunities. These moments led them to feel that their professional contributions were not fully recognized or valued by their schools. Several participants described leaders in their schools as unresponsive to their cultural backgrounds or needs, which contributed to feelings of frustration and made them question whether their schools were truly supportive environments for teachers of color.

For these participants, the stakes of poor leadership were more than just professional frustrations: they were deeply personal. The educators in this study entered the profession to

make a difference, often inspired by past mentors or personal values rooted in service. Yet without consistent administrative support, they found themselves emotionally taxed, professionally disrespected, and mentally checked out. One participant summarized it this way: "When you don't feel invested in, you stop investing yourself." The costs of that withdrawal are felt not only by the teachers, but by the students and communities they serve.

Theme 2: Mentorship and Peer Networks

Mentorship and peer collaboration emerged as central threads in participants' narratives about what helped them navigate the complexities of teaching in diverse, high-need schools. While formal mentoring structures were inconsistently available or, in some cases, entirely absent, educators pointed to the power of informal support systems and colleagues who offered encouragement, shared lesson plans, or simply understood the cultural and emotional weight of being an African American educator. These relationships often served as a professional lifeline, particularly in environments where institutional support was lacking. Informal mentorship extended beyond technical teaching advice to encompass emotional validation, identity affirmation, and collective resilience in the face of systemic challenges. As Participant D explained, "I didn't have a formal mentor, but I had people who poured into me … people who had walked in my shoes." These lived experiences emphasize how culturally connected, community-driven mentoring relationships became more meaningful than any top-down initiative, offering both practical guidance and a sense of belonging.

For many participants, mentorship was not about isolated advisory sessions, but rather about having a reliable and empathetic guide who could help them navigate the unique cultural, institutional, and emotional challenges of being an African American educator. As Participant A stated, "If we did have mentorship … just to help us understand what you might come up against

and then how to navigate that … even now I still don't know what to do." The comments indicate that formal support structures were not a central factor in the experience. Instead, emphasis was put on the importance of finding colleagues who shared the same approach to teaching and valued student success in the same way.

Participant C's experience highlighted the power of fraternal and community-rooted mentorship networks. The educator described being supported since youth by members of a local group who remained engaged throughout their teaching career. "We had mentors, teachers and coaches, who talked to us about this before we went to college," the teacher shared. "We still have those same mentors today." For Participant C, these community mentors played a key role throughout their career, providing consistency and guidance beyond what was available within the school.

Participant B also described an absence of meaningful institutional mentoring and expressed that this lack of formal structure increased the need for informal peer support. "Nobody tells you what to expect … nobody knows what to do. But if we had people who could relate and give tools, like this is what you do when this happens, it would make all the difference." Their comments highlighted a desire for mentorship that went beyond instructional support to acknowledge the unique emotional and racial challenges faced as an African American educator. The participant expressed that having a mentor who shared or understood those experiences would have made a significant difference in feeling supported.

Several participants emphasized that mentorship should include advocacy and emotional buffering in schools where their expertise was often dismissed or underutilized. Participant D explained, "The administration … they nitpick. Once you don't do what they want, they'll come back at you. That's when you need someone who can help you navigate the politics, not just the

lesson plans." The description shows how mentors could offer a sense of protection and support in environments where participants experienced microaggressions or uneven power dynamics.

Other participants noted that mentorship sometimes came from colleagues who shared a similar teaching philosophy or work ethic. Participant E described it simply: "As long as we were on the same page when it came to teaching kids … that made all the difference." In this case, mentorship was not part of a formal program, but rather a collegial relationship grounded in shared values around teaching and learning. These informal peer relationships were often more meaningful than top-down mentorships that failed to account for teachers' cultural identities or classroom realities. Rather than relying on a prescriptive model of support, teachers like Participant E found sustenance in collegial alliances built on mutual respect, shared instructional goals, and emotional solidarity. Several participants emphasized that the most effective mentoring relationships were built on trust and mutual respect rather than authority. They also noted that feeling heard and supported in a nonhierarchical dynamic played a key role in their decision to remain in the profession.

In the absence of culturally responsive or empathetic leadership, these horizontal relationships became critical. They provided a space to vent frustrations, troubleshoot classroom challenges, and affirm each other's value in systems where African American educators were often overlooked or undervalued. As Participant E's experience illustrates, informal mentorship rooted in shared values may not carry an official title, but it can be just as powerful, if not more so, in helping teachers persist in environments where institutional support falls short.

Overall, participants described mentorship as emerging most often through informal channels rather than formal district programs. These relationships might be built through fraternal organizations, longstanding peer connections, or professional camaraderie. Several

participants noted that these networks were important sources of emotional and instructional support, which often took the form of everyday conversations, shared planning, or encouragement from more experienced colleagues. In many cases, these peer-based or culturally grounded mentorships helped participants feel less isolated and more supported in their roles.

Theme 3: Burnout and Emotional Drain

Many participants described their roles as emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting, emphasizing the toll that teaching in high-need school environments had taken over time. The term "burnout" surfaced repeatedly, often paired with phrases like "drained," "on edge," and "constantly overwhelmed." Rather than being a temporary or isolated feeling, burnout was described as an ongoing condition shaped by the intersection of multiple stressors: excessive paperwork, challenging student behaviors, inconsistent administrative support, and the broader demands placed on teachers in under-resourced and underserved communities. Participants noted that their emotional well-being was frequently secondary to academic performance expectations, leaving little room for self-care, recovery, or reflection. This led several teachers to describe feeling detached from the profession they once loved or performing their duties on "autopilot" to simply get through the day. For these educators, burnout slowly eroded their passion, energy, and long-term commitment to the classroom.

Participant A explained, "It's more paperwork than it is teaching. It's more classroom management than it is teaching." The comment reflected a common frustration across multiple interviews: that teachers' responsibilities for discipline, integrating behavior intervention, testing logistics, and compliance paperwork consumed time and energy meant for student instruction. Teachers described themselves as juggling roles, often without support or recognition, and feeling like teaching had become secondary to managing crises and mandates.

Participant B said, "I'd be physically and mentally, emotionally exhausted, like drained, and I said, why am I doing this?" This teacher described how the demands of lesson planning, grading, managing classroom behavior, and addressing student needs left them depleted by the end of each day. Despite entering the profession with a deep love for learning and a desire to make a difference, Participant B admitted to feeling disillusioned by the disconnect between the level of effort and the compensation received. Their paycheck after taxes, pension deductions, and health care costs led them to reconsider whether teaching was sustainable long term. While Participant B had not left the profession, their comments revealed an ongoing internal struggle where their passion for teaching was no longer enough to counterbalance its physical and emotional costs. These experiences reflected the burden of cumulative stress, a theme echoed by others, in which burnout was tied not only to workload, but also to a sense of being undervalued.

Similarly, Participant A noted, "I want to leave often." Despite having nearly 30 years of classroom experience and holding multiple advanced credentials, including a supervisor certificate and a master's degree, this person reported feeling consistently unsupported throughout their entire career in urban school districts. Extensive experience had not shielded them from the persistent lack of resources, leadership inconsistency, and emotional labor tied to working in high-need communities. Their desire to exit the profession was not occasional or fleeting, but felt frequently, driven by years of frustration. Still, Participant C remained in the classroom, largely due to financial necessity. "Sometimes you stay in just because you need to," this participant explained. Burnout was not a single event or brief phase, but a condition in the systemic realities of diverse community education. The chronic nature of this emotional burden, compounded by feelings of invisibility and institutional neglect, contributed to an ongoing sense of weariness and emotional depletion that shaped Participant C's outlook on teaching.

Participant D described an environment where persistent stress impacted their emotional well-being and ability to perform effectively in the classroom. "It was like I was walking on eggshells every day," the participant recalled, emphasizing how the tense atmosphere within their school left them feeling anxious and constantly on edge. The pressure extended beyond instructional duties, touching nearly every aspect of work life. "You need to be a whole person," Participant D claimed, referring to the importance of mental and emotional stability in supporting young learners. However, they noted that a feeling of stability was nearly impossible to maintain in a space of constant surveillance and lack of trust. "When you feel attacked or like people are just waiting for you to mess up, it messes with your peace." This teacher's experience of burnout was closely tied to their school's climate and the behavior of school leaders. Participant D said the environment had become so toxic that they considered seeking medical leave due to the emotional strain, and described the school culture as one that wore teachers down rather than built them up.

The compounding effects of fatigue, hostility, and undervaluation created a sense of emotional wear among participants. Participant E described bringing up student test scores and receiving praise from colleagues, but still questioned their future in teaching after being overlooked for a leadership role. "It affects how you teach," Participant E said. "You're not invested like before. You're just doing what you have to do." The lack of recognition and limited opportunities to advance caused this teacher to detach emotionally from the role, even though they continued to perform well in the classroom.

Participant F described this emotional toll as cumulative. "You end up doing just what is required so that you can maintain it," they explained. "Meanwhile, your eyes are everywhere looking for other opportunities." Teachers continued working not because they felt energized or

professionally fulfilled, but because of necessity, routine, or loyalty to their students, despite feeling depleted.

Participant G touched on the psychological impact of teaching in challenging settings, describing the level of student misbehavior at their school as "astronomical." Burnout for them connected to the difficulty of teaching in environments marked by community violence and school reputations that deterred staff retention. "They don't work hard to maintain us," Participant G said, referencing a perceived lack of investment from district or building leadership. The cumulative effect, they explained, was not just losing teachers, but wearing them down in the process.

This pattern of exhaustion was not limited to newer teachers. Veteran educators with decades of experience and strong classroom management skills expressed similar sentiments. Participants linked burnout to multiple ongoing stressors, including classroom challenges, inconsistent administrative support, and a lack of appreciation. Many expressed that these factors wore them down over time. Though the causes varied across participants, the descriptions were consistent: burnout was deep, ongoing, and shaped not only career decisions but also daily classroom practices. Teachers reported modifying their instructional approach, narrowing their emotional availability, or seeking outside employment as a result of the emotional strain. As Participant H said, "You just keep going, but it wears you down after a while."

Theme 4: Climate and Culture

Participants said toxic school climates were a significant factor contributing to their emotional strain and thoughts of leaving the profession. In many cases, these climates were defined by student behavior, administrative actions, strained staff relationships, or an overall lack of psychological safety within the workplace. Teachers described schools where distrust,

micromanagement, and fear of retaliation were common, contributing to daily anxiety and

detachment from their roles. These toxic climates often affected teachers' mental health and

sense of professional belonging.

Participant B described their school environment as increasingly hostile, especially due to

the behavior of school leadership. "The principal is never to be seen," the teacher stated. "She

doesn't know her staff, and that's why the climate and culture is so toxic." Participant B shared

that most of the staff relied on the assistant principal for any kind of administrative support,

which led to distrust in the leadership structure and a feeling of professional isolation. Their

comments indicated that staff morale was low and teachers did not feel seen or supported by

those in leadership roles.

Participant D provided a perspective of what it felt like to work in a school where every

step seemed to be scrutinized. "It was like I was walking on eggshells every day," this participant

noted. "You need to be a whole person ... but when you feel attacked or like people are just

waiting for you to mess up, it messes with your peace." Participant D explained that the stress of

constantly being monitored or criticized interfered with their emotional well-being and ability to

remain fully present for all of the students. This teacher even considered taking medical leave

due to the mental toll of the workplace climate.

Participant G described a school where the challenges of working in a high-crime

neighborhood compounded the already difficult internal dynamics of the school building. "When

I came here, the climate and culture felt like a family," the participant shared. "But it's very hard

to retain teachers at this particular school because the behaviors here are astronomical."

Participant G noted a decline in staff morale over time and said the demands of managing student

behavior and navigating external stressors contributed to ongoing teacher attrition.

Participant F had concerns about how their school climate contributed to feelings of professional stagnation. They said they had been passed over for a leadership opportunity without so much as an interview, and expressed that it was not just the decision itself, but the surrounding silence that damaged morale. "They didn't even interview any of us ... they just brought someone else in," this teacher said. The absence of transparency and fairness left Participant F feeling disrespected and contributed to a broader sense of frustration with the school environment.

Participant E described how a lack of recognition for contributions led to emotional detachment from the profession. "It affects how you teach," they explained. "You're not invested like before. You're just doing what you have to do." For Participant E, disengagement stemmed from a climate where teacher input was overlooked and leadership decisions seemed arbitrary or disconnected from the needs of staff.

Several participants noted that toxic climates were created by administrative behavior, but reinforced through negative staff dynamics. Some described staff cliques, lack of collaboration, and even competition among teachers that was unintentionally promoted by administrators. This created an atmosphere where educators felt pitted against one another, rather than supported as a team.

Participants also discussed a lack of emotional or professional safety in their schools. When teachers did not feel they could speak honestly, request support, or admit to struggling, the school environment became emotionally taxing. Teachers described bottling up stress, avoiding certain colleagues, or disengaging from school events as a means of self preservation.

For example, Participant C shared that their school's culture left them feeling alienated rather than encouraged. "It didn't feel like a nurturing environment ... it felt like you were being

watched all the time," the teacher explained. "How can you nurture young minds when you, as the teacher, aren't even being nurtured?" These comments reflected a workplace where professional distrust and emotional distance were commonplace, contributing to exhaustion and decreased morale.

Overall, participants who described toxic school climates often tied their experiences to broader issues of leadership, staff relationships, and emotional safety. These environments were described as draining, discouraging, and unsustainable. The narratives shared under this theme include repeated mentions of workplace tension, low morale, and emotional strain. Participants described how these conditions shaped their day-to-day experiences and contributed to their thoughts about leaving the profession.

Theme 5: Professional Advancement and Systemic Barriers

Another recurring theme in the interviews was systemic barriers that limited participants' ability to advance professionally. Several educators described stagnating in their careers, despite years of experience, advanced degrees, and a consistent record of classroom success. While none pointed to explicit policies or formal exclusions, many noted patterns that made professional growth feel inaccessible, particularly for African American teachers working in high-need school districts.

As previously described, Participant F was passed over for a leadership position after more than a decade of service and holding a graduate degree. "They brought someone in from the outside, and nobody even got interviewed in-house," the participant stated. "We had already been doing the work, and it felt like it didn't matter." According to this participant, a panel composed entirely of White staff members selected a candidate from another district without considering internal applicants. "It makes you feel like your contributions are invisible."

Participant A reflected similarly, sharing that while they held a supervisor certification and nearly 30 years of classroom experience, internal leadership roles never felt attainable for them. "I've applied for different things, and I've never gotten a callback," the participant said. "It's like they already know who they're giving it to before they even post the job." This sentiment was echoed across several interviews, suggesting a pattern where African American internal candidates felt overlooked or dismissed before being given a fair chance.

The feeling of being professionally "stuck" led some participants to question whether continued efforts were worthwhile. Participant C explained, "You do what you're supposed to do, you meet the goals, and you still get passed over. It starts to feel like advancement isn't really based on merit." This educator described mentoring new teachers, leading school-wide initiatives, and still not being seen as leadership material. "You start to internalize it after a while," the participant added.

Several educators also shared concerns about how opportunities for professional development, such as conference attendance, training programs, or special assignments, seemed reserved for a select few. Participant D remarked, "It's the same faces every time. They get sent to every training, every workshop. The rest of us just have to figure it out." This participant emphasized that such opportunities enhanced professional growth and visibility for future leadership roles. They explained that being excluded from these experiences made it more difficult to build a pathway toward advancement.

Participant G said that after more than two decades in the classroom, no clear pathway to leadership had ever been presented to them. "You can be here twenty years, and still not be seen as someone they want to invest in," the participant said. "It's like they just want you to stay in

your lane." This educator described feeling proud of their classroom work but disappointed by the lack of broader career options or invitations to grow in the field.

A few participants indicated that repeated rejections led them to stop seeking leadership roles altogether. "You stop applying after a while," Participant B said. "You already know who they're going to pick." They also expressed that the lack of diversity in current leadership made it harder to envision a future where advancement was possible: "There's no one who looks like us in those positions, so it's hard to picture yourself ever getting there."

These accounts illustrate how systemic barriers shaped participants' experiences and decisions. The absence of inclusive leadership pipelines and equitable access to professional opportunities limited both the morale and the retention of experienced educators. For many, the perception of a "glass ceiling" was not theoretical: it was embedded in their day-to-day reality, influencing how they saw their roles, their futures, and the profession as a whole.

Theme 6: Racial Identity and Representation

Participants frequently discussed how their racial identity shaped day-to-day interactions, responsibilities, and professional experiences within their school communities. The experience of being one of the only African American educators in a building or on staff was commonly described, often leading to a sense of heightened visibility, cultural disconnect, and emotional weight.

Participant A noted, "I'm the only African American teacher in the building," and explained that this visibility came with added expectations that extended beyond typical instructional responsibilities: "It's like everything that's diversity related gets handed to me." Issues related to race, equity, or cultural inclusion were automatically directed their way, regardless of formal role or consent. While Participant A expressed willingness to contribute to

initiatives that supported inclusivity and student belonging, they also reported that these

responsibilities were often assigned informally and without adequate institutional backing.

Equity-related work held personal significance for them, but there was no formal recognition of

the added labor involved, nor were accommodations or resources provided to offset the time and

emotional energy required. This led to feelings of professional imbalance and occasional

burnout, especially when Participant A's contributions were treated as supplemental rather than

essential to the school's broader goals.

Participant B described interactions where students openly questioned their professional

legitimacy based on assumptions about language and background. "You're a learner of English,

how can you teach English?" the students asked, referencing the participant's heritage. The

participant explained that such comments were not isolated incidents, but part of an ongoing

experience that required frequent clarification and cultural education. "I had to educate them

constantly." Participant B said they regularly explained that English was the official language of

their home country, and that their perceived accent did not reflect a lack of fluency or

competence. The teacher further noted, "I had to sell myself to them every day," indicating the

persistent need to re-establish authority and credibility in the classroom. These recurring

interactions were handled with patience and a sense of responsibility, but Participant B

acknowledged the emotional weight of having to repeatedly justify their identity and

qualifications. They described navigating these student perceptions as tiring and, over time,

contributing to a sense of being unfairly scrutinized in ways that colleagues did not face.

Some participants described staff interactions that revealed unspoken biases about race,

class, and professionalism. Participant C recalled being told, "You must be from the upper

community because you speak so well." The comment, while framed as a compliment, was

received as a reflection of a deeper bias. Participant C responded by sharing their personal background: "My mom is a domestic helper. I'm from the lower class." The teacher recounted this moment as one that stood out, not for its microaggression, but for the assumptions it carried about what professionalism was expected to look or sound like. They described the interaction as one of several moments when their identity and perceived credibility were linked. These types of comments, though not intended to offend, reinforced their sense of being evaluated through a lens shaped by cultural or socioeconomic stereotypes. While the exchange did not result in direct conflict, it left a lasting impression on the participant and demonstrates how background and identity could influence the ways educators were viewed by colleagues.

Participant D expressed frustration over being ignored in team settings. "I'd make a suggestion and no one would respond. Then someone else would say the exact same thing, and everyone would agree." They described these experiences as common, leading to feelings of being invisible or overlooked in group decision-making processes.

Others reflected on the pressure of being seen as role models, especially for African American students. Participant F explained, "You feel like you're carrying more than just your class. You're carrying a whole community." This participant noted that being one of the few African American teachers in their school meant constantly being approached by students and families with both gratitude and high expectations.

Participant G described a meaningful interaction with a student that reflected the emotional connections often formed between African American educators and students of similar backgrounds. "She said to me, 'You remind me of my auntie.' That meant a lot," the participant recalled. This comment was shared as a moment of affirmation, an indication that students saw familiarity, comfort, and representation in their teacher. However, the participant also noted the

weight that came with the recognition: "But it also meant I had to be everything for her."

Participant G explained that the relationship extended beyond instructional responsibilities and

came to include emotional support, mentoring, and cultural connection. These roles were not

formally assigned, but emerged organically from the trust built with students who rarely saw

adults in school who looked like them. The participant shared that such interactions happened

frequently and, while deeply valued, added to the daily emotional labor of teaching. Participant

G felt compelled to remain available and nurturing, often serving as a consistent figure in

students' lives amid school or community instability.

        Other participants described how the lack of diversity in leadership added to a broader

sense of exclusion from school-level decision making and long-term career growth. "There's no

one who looks like me at the top," one participant shared, referring to the noticeable absence of

African American administrators, supervisors, or district leaders within their school system. The

participant continued, "It feels like a glass wall, not a ceiling," expressing that while

advancement might appear theoretically possible, invisible but persistent barriers limited access.

These remarks were conveyed as matter-of-fact reflections rather than complaints.

        The topic of isolation surfaced repeatedly. Participant A explained, "It's hard to vent

when nobody else in the building shares your background." This comment captured a sentiment

shared by multiple participants who felt culturally or professionally isolated within their school

communities. Even when working with friendly or collaborative colleagues, participants

expressed feeling alone in certain experiences, such as navigating racial bias, addressing

microaggressions, or mentoring students of color. Participant A went on to describe how

conversations in the staff lounge or planning meetings often skipped over the emotional

complexities of being the only African American educator in the building. There was a sense that certain frustrations could not be fully voiced or understood without shared lived experience.

Participants spoke with pride about their roles as educators and representatives of their communities, but acknowledged the additional layers of responsibility that came with being "the only one" or "one of the few." Whether it meant confronting stereotypes, managing cultural expectations, or mentoring students who identified with them, the weight of representation was a consistent part of the professional experience described in this study.

Summary of Participant Experiences

The interviews conducted for this study revealed a set of common experiences and recurring challenges faced by African American educators in diverse K–8 school settings. Participants spoke in detail about the day-to-day realities of teaching, highlighting issues that affected their professional satisfaction, sense of belonging, and long-term career plans. These educators described working in buildings marked by high student needs, limited resources, and frequent staff turnover. Many shared that their responsibilities extended far beyond instruction, encompassing roles such as counselor, advocate, mediator, and mentor.

A consistent theme across interviews was the lack of administrative support. Teachers shared that school leaders were often absent, unresponsive, or disengaged. This lack of support was described in various ways, from minimal feedback to an absence of disciplinary backing, and contributed to feelings of professional neglect and emotional fatigue.

In response to this gap, many educators turned to mentorship and peer networks, often developed outside formal systems. Participants described finding guidance and encouragement through community ties, fraternity affiliations, or trusted colleagues who had shared cultural or

professional experiences. These informal networks often filled a void left by the absence of institutional mentorship structures.

Burnout and emotional drain were also widely reported. Teachers detailed how the cumulative weight of behavior management, paperwork, and academic demands wore them down over time. Several participants described feeling exhausted, undercompensated, and emotionally detached from their roles, yet continued teaching out of necessity or dedication to their students.

Another recurring theme was the impact of toxic school climates. Participants described workplace environments characterized by mistrust, micromanagement, and strained relationships among staff. In some cases, these climates were attributed to inconsistent leadership, lack of transparency, or competitive dynamics that hindered collaboration.

The issue of professional advancement and systemic barriers surfaced as participants reflected on limited opportunities to grow within their schools. Teachers described being passed over for leadership roles, excluded from development opportunities, or discouraged by unclear hiring practices. Some shared that after repeated attempts, they no longer pursued advancement because they felt the outcomes were predetermined.

Lastly, participants discussed the role of racial identity and representation in their professional lives. Being one of the few African American educators in a school often led to feelings of isolation, cultural disconnection, and heightened scrutiny. Teachers described moments when their credibility was questioned or when they were expected to lead diversity initiatives without institutional support. Many also reflected on the weight of being seen as role models and how this added to the emotional responsibility of their work.

Across all six themes, the findings reflect how personal commitment, systemic conditions, and school-based dynamics intersected to shape the lived experiences of these African American teachers. These educators expressed a strong desire to serve their students and communities, even as they navigated challenges that extended beyond the classroom.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion and analysis of the findings presented in Chapter 4, connecting participants' narratives to the broader research and implications on leadership, policy, and practice. The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of African American teachers working in diverse K–8 schools across the tri-state region, particularly examining how these experiences influenced their decisions to remain in or leave the profession.

Through a thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data, six major themes emerged: lack of administrative support, mentorship and peer networks, burnout and emotional drain, toxic school climate, professional advancement and systemic barriers, and racial identity and representation. These themes consistently reflected systemic issues that extended beyond the classroom, touching on leadership, equity, professional isolation, and race-based challenges. Participants described school environments marked by strained relationships with administrators, emotional depletion from constant stress, and limited pathways for professional growth. Despite a shared commitment to student success and equity, many educators expressed feeling overwhelmingly unsupported and marginalized.

The discussion in this chapter situates these findings within the literature and introduces the concept of African American equity gap attrition. This term captures the cumulative, identity-specific conditions that contribute to disproportionate attrition rates for African American educators. Rather than attributing the departure of African American teachers solely to common causes such as burnout or job dissatisfaction, African American equity gap attrition highlights how exclusionary structures, racialized workplace dynamics, and systemic inequities

intersect to push them out of the profession in high-need schools. Understanding this concept is essential for developing more responsive leadership, retention strategies, and equity-driven reforms that move beyond surface-level solutions.

Restatement of the Research Question

This study was guided by the following central research question: How do the experiences and perspectives of African American teachers influence their decisions to stay or leave the teaching profession in diverse K–8 schools?

This chapter interprets the qualitative data presented in Chapter 4 through a broader analytical lens. The goal is to better understand how identity, leadership, school culture, and systemic conditions intersect to shape African American educators' professional trajectories.

African American Equity Gap Attrition

The themes that emerged from this study reveal a consistent set of compounding challenges experienced by African American educators working in diverse K-8 public schools—challenges that go far beyond generalized notions of job dissatisfaction or burnout. Participants did not only express frustration with workload or compensation: rather, they described layered, identity-specific experiences shaped by race, marginalization, and systemic exclusion. These included being passed over for leadership roles, carrying the invisible burden of underrepresentation, encountering racial microaggressions, and working within school cultures that offered little support for their emotional or professional well-being. While each of these challenges has been explored in the literature individually, the data suggest that the intersection of systemic inequities, racial isolation, and professional exclusion creates a distinct and racialized pattern of attrition for African American teachers.

To name and frame this layered phenomenon, this study introduces the term *African American equity gap attrition* to describe how school systems, through patterns of underrepresentation, cultural disconnection, restricted mobility, and lack of meaningful support, systematically fail to retain African American educators. This term calls attention to the ways in which identity, power, and policy interact to undermine retention, particularly in underresourced and high-need schools.

What differentiates African American equity gap attrition from traditional attrition concepts is its race-conscious lens. Conventional models of teacher attrition often emphasize quantitative variables such as salary, tenure, school performance metrics, and working conditions, typically using data from large-scale surveys like the Schools and Staffing Survey to identify generalized trends (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll, 2001). While these studies offer valuable insights into structural patterns, they fail to capture how African American educators experience heightened surveillance, isolation, and restricted pathways to leadership, despite their qualifications and dedication. The findings in this study show that participants were deeply committed to their students and passionate about teaching, yet they also described feeling emotionally depleted, professionally invisible, and unable to envision sustainable career growth within their institutions.

Conceptualizing this term is both an act of conceptual clarity and a call for structural accountability. *African American equity gap attrition* is necessary vocabulary for educational leaders, policymakers, and teacher preparation programs to better understand that African American teachers are not simply leaving the profession, but are being systematically pushed out by institutional conditions that remain unaddressed. The data support that until educational

systems adopt race-conscious leadership practices, equitable hiring, promotional structures, and culturally responsive support, this pattern will persist.

Through defining and introducing the term, this study contributes a new theoretical concept to the discourse on teacher attrition. It reframes the issue not as an individual failure to persist, but as evidence of a larger, racialized equity gap embedded in the design and culture of public education. The discussion that follows in this chapter draws on each of the six core themes from the interviews to explore how African American equity gap attrition manifests in school settings and what it reveals about the deeper structures that shape teacher attrition in the United States.

Thematic Analysis

The following sections offer an in-depth analysis of the six themes presented in Chapter 4 by drawing on the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 2, including CRT (Crenshaw et al., 1995), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-billings & Tate, 1995), transformational leadership (Bass, 1995), servant leadership (Liden et al., 2014), and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), to contextualize the lived experiences of African American teachers and illuminate how structural inequities, school leadership practices, and cultural dynamics interfarinsect to shape their career decisions.

Theme 1: Lack of Administrative Support

Participants consistently described a pervasive absence of administrative support, ranging from a lack of visibility and mentorship to indifference toward their cultural experiences and instructional needs. This affected their morale and contributed to the emotional wear and institutional detachment reported across interviews. For many, school leaders appeared

physically present yet emotionally and pedagogically disengaged, failing to offer meaningful feedback, advocate, or create spaces of safety and inclusion.

These findings echo broader critiques raised in the literature. As Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) and Bass and Avolio (2004) asserted, transformational leadership can improve teacher retention by fostering shared vision and mentorship, yet participants in this study described school environments deprived of such practices. Instead, administrators were perceived as distant figures, more concerned with compliance and optics than relational leadership or cultural responsiveness. This reflects a systemic pattern that CRT scholars have long identified. Crenshaw (2002) and Ladson-billings & Tate and Tate (1995) argued that racially neutral policies and leadership frameworks often obscure the ways in which institutional structures disempower African American educators. When participants in this study noted that they were passed over for opportunities, ignored in meetings, or left without recourse during disciplinary challenges, they were describing manifestations of what CRT names structural inequity. In these moments, race-neutral administrative practice effectively reproduces unequal outcomes.

Furthermore, these findings suggest that the absence of leadership support for African American educators is not an isolated failure of individual principals, but part of a broader pattern of African American equity gap attrition. Seemingly minor acts of neglect, failure to mentor, limited visibility, and dismissiveness in leadership accumulate over time to push African American teachers out of the profession. These are not isolated "bad fits" or individual burnout stories: they represent identity-specific exit pathways forged by systemic omission and administrative apathy.

Bell's (1980) theory of interest convergence also resonates here, as school leaders may only support initiatives or individuals when it aligns with broader district agendas or optics.

When African American educators are not seen as instrumental to those interests, their support systems diminish. Similarly, Kohli and Pizarro (2022) noted how racialized school structures failed to support the professional legitimacy of African American teachers, particularly in high-need districts. The teachers in this study described how their ideas were dismissed, their classroom contributions went unrecognized, and leaders often deferred to White staff for opportunities or trust.

In alignment with these critiques, the findings in this study reinforce that African American teachers face not only emotional exhaustion and professional frustration, but also a systemic disinvestment that fuels attrition. This disinvestment remains invisible in many school districts' retention analyses. By naming it as African American equity gap attrition, this study contributes a lens that centers the role of racialized institutional dynamics in understanding why African American educators continue to leave the profession at disproportionate rates.

Theme 2: Mentorship and Peer Networks

The participants' reliance on informal mentorship and peer-based support underscores what Ladson-billings & Tate (1995) called the "cultural mismatch" between educators of color and dominant institutional structures. When formal mentorship programs were unavailable, insufficient, or culturally misaligned, participants sought out affinity-based support from fraternities, longstanding friendships, or community mentors, illustrating the adaptive strategies Black educators employ to resist institutional neglect. These peer relationships were not supplemental but essential, reflecting the type of "culturally sustaining" mentorship that Ladson-billings & Tate emphasized as crucial to educator identity and retention.

Crenshaw's (1995) concept of intersectionality is also critical to understanding how participants navigated their professional landscapes. Many faced both racialized isolation and

gendered expectations, particularly when informal mentorship was expected to replace structured

support. The absence of systems that accounted for this complexity left educators to "figure it out

alone," a phrase that appeared repeatedly in interviews and speaks to the burden of unsupported

identity negotiation within institutions. These experiences are not incidental—they represent

African American equity gap attrition in action. A lack of culturally responsive mentorship

serves as a push factor for African American teachers navigating hostile or indifferent

professional environments.

Self-efficacy theory, as advanced by Bandura (1977), also helps frame the data. Several

participants described how the lack of formal guidance, coupled with microaggressions and

tokenism, threatened their confidence. In contrast, affirming peer mentorship, especially from

others who had "walked in their shoes," helped them develop what Bandura termed "mastery

experiences." These experiences are critical in building resilience and sustaining professional

identity, especially in the face of systemic underrepresentation and marginalization.

The findings also reflect what Gist (2017) and Farinde-Wu & Fitchett (2023) described as

the emotional necessity of affinity spaces for Black educators. Participants did not merely value

mentorship: they required it to persist. Where leadership failed to offer developmental support,

peer-based systems became both a psychological buffer and a professional resource. However,

the need to build these networks outside of institutional structures placed an additional emotional

and logistical burden on Black educators, reinforcing patterns of African American equity gap

attrition.

The absence of meaningful institutional mentorship for these teachers reflects what

Delgado (1995) termed the "ordinariness of racism," whereby systems operate under the

assumption that all teachers need the same kinds of support. This colorblind approach erases the

very real and unique challenges African American teachers face, leading to structures that inadvertently alienate the very populations they seek to retain. Mentorship, then, is not merely a retention strategy but a litmus test for institutional equity.

Transformational and servant leadership theory further sharpen the contrast. As Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) noted, effective school leaders actively cultivate mentorship opportunities and nurture talent within their buildings. Yet participants described inconsistent leadership that either delegated mentorship to overworked peers or ignored it entirely. The failure to operationalize leadership as a developmental and relational practice contributes directly to African American equity gap attrition, as systems inadvertently facilitate the departure of the very educators they claim to support.

Finally, Lisle-Johnson and Kohli (2020) highlighted that mentoring, when grounded in racial literacy, becomes a transformative tool for retention and empowerment. The participants' yearning for mentors who could offer not just pedagogical advice, but also cultural affirmation, echoes this research and reveals a deeper institutional failure: the inability to see mentorship as a racialized, identity-affirming act. Where this kind of mentoring was absent, educators felt less rooted and more expendable.

The findings demonstrate that mentorship is not a neutral or optional support: it is an essential, racialized structure of retention. When mentorship is absent or fails to acknowledge the intersecting identities of Black educators, it contributes to African American equity gap attrition.

Theme 3: Burnout and Emotional Drain

Burnout and emotional drain emerged as a significant and pervasive experience among participants, often discussed as a chronic condition rather than an isolated phase. For African American educators working in under-resourced schools, the term *burnout* signified the

accumulation of emotional fatigue, cultural taxation, and systemic neglect. Participants described teaching as a daily balancing act between instructional responsibilities, behavioral management, compliance demands, and emotional support for students, all while receiving minimal institutional support. This layered exhaustion was compounded by structural inequalities that left teachers feeling isolated, undervalued, and emotionally depleted.

This aligns with research by King (2016), who identified how African American educators face a "triple threat" of racial, gendered, and ideological marginalization, making them more susceptible to emotional fatigue. Kohli (2018) explained racial battle fatigue as an ongoing psychological strain resulting from daily racial microaggressions contributing to the physical and mental depletion many teachers experience. When framed through the lens of African American equity gap attrition, these experiences point to a distinct pathway out of the profession when identity-based pressures compound systemic shortcomings. Unlike generalized theories of teacher burnout, African American equity gap attrition contextualizes attrition as the product of racialized emotional labor and institutional disregard.

Participant narratives often reflected these theoretical insights. One educator noted, "It's more paperwork than it is teaching," emphasizing how bureaucratic responsibilities detracted from instructional focus. Others described arriving home emotionally "on edge," mentally exhausted, and unable to recover before the next workday. These testimonies echo Kohli and Pizarro (2022) concept of racial stress as a cumulative toll that not only affects job satisfaction but corrodes personal well-being over time. As Duncan (2019) noted, such fatigue often leads to a gradual "pushout" from the profession, especially when teachers feel trapped in systems that fail to acknowledge or accommodate their lived realities.

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy also offers insight here. Teachers with low perceived self-efficacy are less likely to persist through adversity, particularly in environments where success feels unattainable or unsupported (Bandura, 2016). When African American educators are routinely placed in high-need contexts without adequate resources or leadership, their self-efficacy is undermined. As Cherry (2024) and Gist (2014) observed, the absence of culturally responsive support erodes teachers' confidence and heightens the likelihood of attrition.

Moreover, burnout cannot be divorced from the sociopolitical context of schooling. Crenshaw's (1995) framework of intersectionality shows how race, gender, and institutional power converge to produce conditions of chronic overwork and under-recognition for teachers of color. Educators in this study described being expected to do "everything for everyone," including mentoring students, managing crises, and leading diversity initiatives, all without formal acknowledgment or support. This dynamic reflects what Delgado (1995) and Ladson-billings & Tate (1995) critiqued as the superficial equity of educational reform, one that demands service but withholds advancement.

Ultimately, the literature and data from this study converge on the same point: burnout among African American educators is not merely personal or professional fatigue, it is a reflection of systemic design. African American equity gap attrition positions this phenomenon within a broader equity framework, demonstrating how emotional drain is often the final stage of a long period of institutional neglect, cultural taxation, and unrelenting demands. Without addressing these root causes, retention strategies will remain ineffective, and the profession will continue to lose vital, talented voices from communities that need them most.

Theme 4: Toxic School Climate

The presence of toxic school climates emerged in the data as a major driver of emotional strain, professional disengagement, and eventual attrition for African American educators. These climates were marked by micromanagement, lack of transparency, hierarchical distrust, and interpersonal tensions among staff. These patterns, when viewed through the lenses of CRT, culturally relevant pedagogy, and leadership studies, reveal how systemic inequities shape daily workplace realities and lead to African American equity gap attrition.

Crenshaw's (1995) concept of intersectionality is central to understanding how school climates that appear "generally dysfunctional" can in practice create uniquely hostile conditions for African American teachers. When microaggressions and marginalization are embedded in the school culture, they do not affect all teachers equally. These teachers often navigate a professional landscape in which their presence is visible, their contributions undervalued, and their mistakes immensely scrutinized. As Ladson-billings & Tate (1995) argued, the devaluation of cultural identity within schools extends beyond curriculum to leadership dynamics and staff interactions. This becomes especially noticeable when administrators fail to foster psychologically safe environments where teachers feel supported and empowered.

Leadership studies also reinforce the damaging impact of school climates characterized by distrust and emotional neglect. According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), effective school leaders build inclusive environments through shared decision making and relational trust. The data in this study demonstrated the inverse: school leaders who isolated themselves from staff, showed preferential treatment, or avoided difficult conversations fostered climates of silence and resignation. Teachers in these contexts experienced poor morale and began to internalize a sense of professional invisibility. This coincides with Gist's (2017) work, which illustrated how

African American teachers often face workplace cultures that are "reluctant to see them as change agents or instructional leaders," leading to chronic disengagement.

From a culturally responsive leadership perspective, the failure to create inclusive and affirming environments represents a missed opportunity to counteract systemic inequities. Gay (2018), along with Kohli and Pizarro (2022), emphasized that affirming environments are essential for the retention and success of educators of color. The findings from this study suggest that many schools fail to create such spaces, contributing to feelings of alienation and eventual attrition. Staff cultures marked by cliques, covert competition, and the devaluation of dissenting perspectives produce an emotional toll that is cumulative. What appears on the surface as "teacher turnover" is, in many cases, the slow erosion of professional identity.

This erosion is a pillar of African American equity gap attrition. Toxic climates serve as accelerators for attrition not simply because they are unpleasant, but because they systematically wear down those who are already navigating racialized working conditions. The convergence of poor leadership, racial isolation, and a lack of emotional safety intensifies the sense that one's contributions are both burdensome and disposable. In this way, toxic school climates reproduce structural inequity through daily professional experiences (Gist, 2017). These dynamics reflect what Kohli and Pizarro (2022) described as the emotional tax of teaching in systems that were never designed with racial equity in mind. Similarly, Ladson-billings & Tate's (1995) concept of educational debt expressed that persistent inequities in school environments are not random, but historically rooted and systematically maintained.

This theme shows the urgent need for school leaders to take a proactive role in shaping school climates and recognizing the structural patterns that disproportionately harm African American educators. As noted by House and Aditya (1997), leadership cannot be disentangled

from the culture it sustains. Without intentional, equity-driven efforts to reshape that culture, toxic climates will remain a central node in the broader pattern of African American equity gap attrition.

Theme 5: Professional Advancement and Systemic Barriers

The findings in Chapter 4 revealed that African American teachers faced persistent obstacles when seeking opportunities for professional advancement, even when their experience, performance, and credentials warranted upward mobility. These barriers, often implicit rather than overt, exemplify the layered inequities central to African American equity gap attrition, a framework that captures how racialized structures systematically narrow the leadership pipeline for teachers of color.

Ladson-billings & Tate and Tate (1995) argued that education is not merely a neutral system of knowledge delivery, but a racially stratified institution in which power and privilege are unevenly distributed. This was evident in participants' accounts of being overlooked for promotions or excluded from leadership roles despite longstanding service. As participants described, advancement often appeared preordained for external candidates, typically White, while internal African American educators were bypassed without clear justification. This dynamic aligns with Crenshaw's (1995) concept of structural intersectionality, where the convergence of race, profession, and institutional culture shapes not only how opportunity is accessed but who is deemed eligible to pursue it.

Research from Farinde et al. (2015) similarly found that Black educators were frequently left out of critical leadership development networks and professional development avenues, depriving them of the relational capital often necessary for upward mobility. This was reinforced by Duncan (2019), who described hiring practices in education as frequently hazy and driven by

subjective perceptions of "fit," a term often steeped in racial and cultural biases. The aggregate result is that African American teachers remain concentrated in classroom roles while decision-making power is overwhelmingly vested in White leadership.

This lack of representation has far-reaching effects. According to Madkins (2011), systemic exclusion from leadership disempowers African American educators and undermines the broader effort to retain a diverse teaching force. Milner (2006) emphasized that leadership diversity matters not just for professional equity, but because leaders of color often serve as policy advocates for inclusive curricula, equity-focused hiring, and culturally affirming school environments. When these voices are absent from leadership, institutional change stalls, and surface-level symbolic diversity replaces meaningful inclusion.

When the African American teachers in this study repeatedly applied for positions and were ignored or dismissed without feedback, they began to disengage from leadership pursuits and, in some cases, from the profession altogether. This is consistent with the findings of King (2016), who highlighted how racial fatigue, born of repeated invalidation, contributes to teacher attrition. Teachers' accounts of reaching a "glass wall," where advancement felt perpetually out of reach, show the psychological and professional consequences of these systemic patterns.

Historical trends further contextualize these findings. As Lash and Ratcliffe (2014) documented, African American educators have faced systemic pushout since the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) era, when thousands of African American teachers were displaced despite their qualifications. Today's barriers may be more subtle, but they are no less potent. As one participant remarked, "You just stop applying after a while." This sense of resignation reflects that African American equity gap attrition operates not only through direct exclusion, but also through the accumulation of racialized discouragement.

Viewing this theme through a leadership lens, Canavesi and Minelli (2021) suggested that servant and transformational leadership models, when authentically practiced, can help counteract patterns of exclusion by centering equity, shared purpose, and relational empowerment. Bass and Avolio (2004) emphasized that transformational leaders elevate those they serve through vision, trust, and individualized support. House and Aditya (1997) similarly asserted the importance of culturally attuned leadership that reflects and responds to the diversity within an organization. Yet these conditions were notably absent from many participants' accounts in this study: they described school leaders who were often disengaged, autocratic, or inconsistent, which undermined trust and professional growth.

This disconnect is particularly evident in schools serving racially diverse populations with culturally homogenous leadership. As Ladson-billings & Tate and Tate (1995) argued, equity cannot be achieved when leadership fails to interrogate the racialized norms that structure opportunity and advancement. In the context of this study, leaders often failed to acknowledge or disrupt the institutional patterns that kept African American educators at the margins. Gay (2018) and Kohli and Pizarro (2022) noted that leadership rooted in cultural responsiveness is essential for retaining African American teachers and supporting their professional identities. Again, without such intentional leadership, symbolic diversity takes the place of meaningful inclusion, and the cycle of exclusion remains unbroken.

The failure to enact inclusive leadership contributes directly to African American equity gap attrition. Participants were not simply denied advancement: they were denied recognition, influence, and the opportunity to shape the institutions they had served for so long. The missing link here is cognitive, relational, and structural. Leaders who ignore the lived realities of African American educators become gatekeepers, reinforcing patterns of stagnation and attrition under

the guise of neutrality or social governing. African American equity gap attrition, in this context, is a consequence of institutional cultures that claim equity while preserving exclusion.

Altogether, professional advancement barriers for African American educators are manifestations of systemic inequality embedded within school structures. These barriers function as mechanisms of African American equity gap attrition, diminishing the presence of African American educators in leadership and contributing to a cycle in which representation, retention, and reform are continuously delayed.

Theme 6: Racial Identity and Representation

Participants described a recurring disconnect in their diverse community schools between surface-level diversity and the deeper institutional recognition of racial identity in professional spaces. Despite teaching in racially and culturally inclusive environments, these teachers frequently navigated complex conditions that rendered their own racial identities invisible. These tensions contributed to feelings of professional isolation, cultural mismatch, and a diminished sense of agency, all of which reflect the structural patterns associated with African American equity gap attrition.

Ladson-billings & Tate (1995) and Gay (2018) described how African American educators often play dual roles as instructors and cultural mediators. In many schools, they are expected to serve as unofficial spokespeople for equity while receiving minimal institutional backing to fulfill that role meaningfully. Participants in this study reported being informally assigned diversity-related duties, asked to explain cultural misunderstandings, or relied upon to mentor students of color, all without systemic recognition or relief from other responsibilities of teaching. As Kohli and Pizarro (2022) noted, such labor, while rooted in care, becomes exploitative when unreciprocated and unsupported.

These conditions share Crenshaw's (1995) concept of intersectional marginalization, wherein individuals experience compounded barriers due to overlapping identity categories. In the case of African American teachers, race and professional roles intersect to create a unique vulnerability. Their presence is often celebrated rhetorically but devalued structurally. For some participants in this study, being one of the only African American educators on staff magnified feelings of isolation. This is not limited to White-majority schools: even in "diverse" settings, staff diversity often lags behind student demographics, creating environments where cultural belonging is unevenly distributed (Milner, 2006).

The emotional toll of racial representation without institutional support was consistently described by participants. This aligns with Nadal's (2018) work on racial microaggressions in professional environments, which noted how repeated invalidations, even subtle, accumulated over time. Participants in this study articulated the weight of being constantly evaluated for their perceived alignment with unspoken cultural norms. Being second-guessed by students, bypassed for leadership opportunities, or overlooked in team decision-making processes were not isolated incidents, but part of a broader structural pattern. These experiences highlight how systemic bias operates beneath the facade of school diversity.

Moreover, a lack of racial diversity in leadership further constrains professional growth, mentorship access, and identity affirmation for African American educators. As Renzulli et al. (2011) stated, representation in leadership is a catalyst for cultivating aspiration, fostering inclusion, and shaping institutional culture. When educators see individuals who reflect their racial and cultural identities occupying roles of authority and influence, it supports and strengthens their potential for advancement and signals that their contributions are valued at every level of the organization. Conversely, the absence of such representation communicates an

implicit message about whose leadership is deemed legitimate. Participants in this study described that in schools where leadership remained overwhelmingly White, advancement felt structurally inaccessible regardless of qualifications or tenure.

The visibility of African American teachers in these settings was often used as a marker of diversity, yet it did not translate into substantive inclusion in decision making or leadership pipelines. Ladson-billings & Tate (1995) and Gist (2017) called this "diversity as optics," a performative commitment to inclusion that lacks structural follow through. Several participants described being encouraged to mentor students of color or serve on diversity committees, but found themselves passed over for promotions or excluded from influential schoolwide conversations. Such experiences show the limitations of inclusion and highlight the psychological and professional toll of being seen, but not heard. These candidates often wondered why they would be chosen to mentor and foster growth among staff but then would not be fit to lead.

This disparity between rhetorical inclusion and structural exclusion is the backbone of African American equity gap attrition. When teachers of color are systematically denied access to leadership pathways, despite their experience and expertise, it reinforces institutional norms that marginalize non-White leadership styles and cultural perspectives (Bass & Avolio, 2004). Over time, this leads to disengagement, diminished motivation, and eventual departure from the profession, not due to lack of commitment, but due to the perceived ineffectiveness of navigating systems that refuse to recognize their full value. In this way, symbolic diversity becomes a substitute for meaningful transformation, masking the deeper equity gaps that drive African American educators out of the field.

Some participants described their experiences working in predominantly White schools as consistent with experiences in diverse settings, in terms of racial isolation and cultural disconnect. The difference, however, lay in the added layer of overt visibility, being "the only one" in a sea of Whiteness, which intensified their role as cultural intermediaries. Nonetheless, the most persistent challenges emerged from schools where diversity in enrollment was not matched by diversity in staffing, leadership, or policy implementation. As Ladson-billings & Tate (1995) argued, diversity must extend beyond optics and permeate institutional practices in order to produce meaningful inclusion and equity.

The data show that African American educators in diverse schools are caught between two institutional contradictions. They are overrelied upon to carry out racial representation, yet undersupported in doing so; they are praised for their presence, but excluded from influence. These contradictions not only affect daily working conditions but also chip away at long-term professional investment. In this way, racial identity becomes a site of labor, conflict, and meaning that is central to understanding teacher attrition through the lens of African American equity gap attrition.

Figure 1

Visualizing African American Equity Gap Attrition
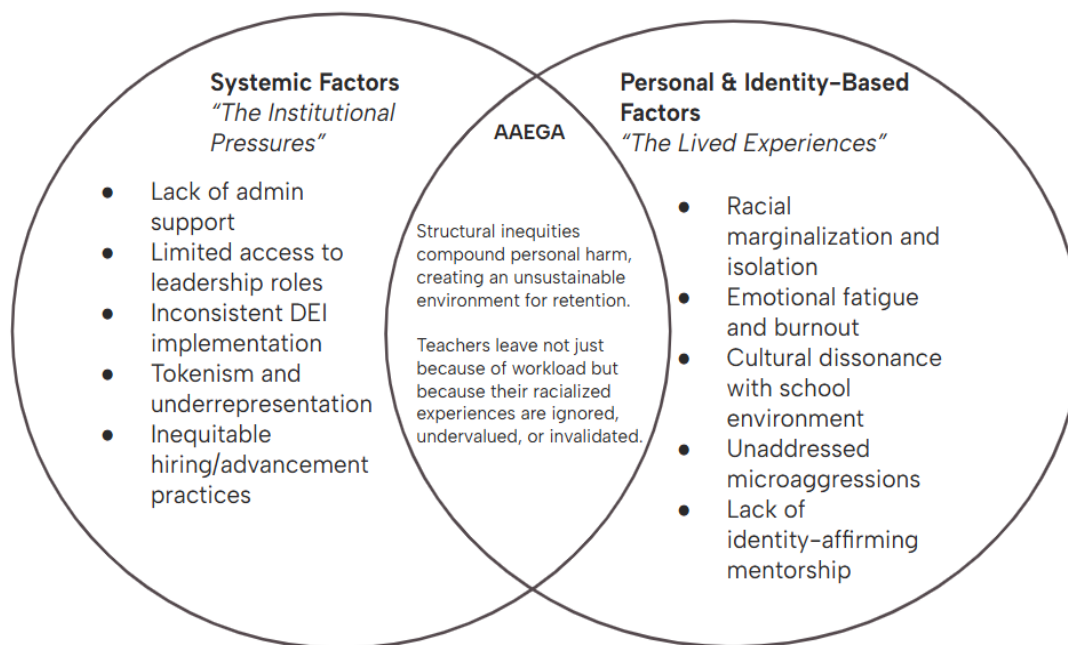
Note. AAEGA = African American equity gap attrition; DEI = diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Visualizing African American Equity Gap Attrition

To deepen the reader's understanding of how attrition functions uniquely for African American educators, Figure 1 provides a visual synthesis of the concept of African American equity gap attrition. This diagram illustrates that it is not caused by a single, isolated factor, but instead occurs at the intersection of two major domains: systemic pressures and personal, identity-based experiences.

The left side of Figure 1 represents systemic factors, the institutional and structural barriers educators face. These include lack of administrative support; limited access to leadership roles; inconsistent or symbolic diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives; tokenism;

underrepresentation; and inequitable hiring and advancement practices. These institutional

deficits can destabilize the profession for all teachers, but disproportionately impact African

American educators operating within predominantly underresourced schools.

On the right side, Figure 1 identifies personal and identity-based factors, the lived,

internalized experiences that affect emotional well-being and persistence. These include racial

marginalization, emotional fatigue, cultural dissonance within the school environment,

unaddressed microaggressions, and the lack of identity-affirming mentorship. These experiences

accumulate over time, contributing to a sense of disconnection, professional exhaustion, and

alienation.

At the center of the diagram lies African American equity gap attrition itself: the

compounded space where institutional failures and personal racialized experiences converge. As

Figure 1 demonstrates, teachers are not simply leaving the profession due to generic job

dissatisfaction or workload. Rather, they are navigating hostile or invalidating environments

where their identity is either erased, tokenized, or unsupported. The result is a form of attrition

that is uniquely structural and identity-linked, the product of systems and experiences that render

these teachers' presence unsustainable over time.

Figure 1 reinforces a central argument of this study: that solving African American

teacher attrition cannot rely on surface-level reforms or one-dimensional solutions. Both

institutional change and relational, identity-affirming support are necessary. Schools must move

beyond recruitment and address the daily realities of working in environments that fail to reflect

or protect the identities of the educators they employ.

Ultimately, this visual serves as a conceptual summary and a call to action. It captures the

interwoven nature of the challenges reported by participants and shows the urgency of

addressing African American equity gap attrition through systemic and culturally responsive reform. As such, it supports the broader conclusion that attrition in this context is not a matter of personal resilience or professional fit, it is a structural consequence of unacknowledged and compounded inequity.

The Political Climate and Pushback on Equity in Education

The findings of this study must also be understood within the context of a shifting sociopolitical landscape, particularly as it relates to race, education, and equity. In recent years, political discourse surrounding public education has become increasingly polarized, with heightened scrutiny placed on schools' roles in addressing systemic inequality, race-conscious pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices. While this dissertation centers the lived experiences of African American educators and introduces the concept of African American equity gap attrition, it does so against the backdrop of a broader ideological climate that is often hostile to equity-driven work.

Across the country, legislative efforts have sought to limit the discussion of race, gender, and history in K–12 schools. CRT has become a flashpoint in public debates, leading to increased censorship of instructional content, book bans, and retractions of DEI-related information. For African American educators, and those who advocate alongside them, this climate creates both professional and emotional tension. Many feel they must walk on eggshells, carefully navigating how and when to speak on issues of racial justice or identity, particularly in predominantly White districts or politically conservative regions.

This sense of constraint was echoed in this study's findings, where participants described pressure to conform to dominant narratives or to remain silent in the face of inequities. Several shared that pushing back against unjust policies or advocating for marginalized students was met

with resistance, ranging from administrative indifference to outright disciplinary consequences. These realities speak to a deeper fear that advocating for equity may jeopardize one's professional standing or future opportunities.

The current pushback on DEI not only affects policy and curriculum, it also shapes workplace culture and educator morale. When teachers feel they must suppress their identity, language, or advocacy to fall in line with shifting expectations, it reinforces the attrition mechanisms this study set out to understand. Silence becomes a survival strategy, and retention becomes a matter of emotional self-preservation rather than career fulfillment.

Understanding African American teacher attrition requires a comprehensive view of not only school-level dynamics, but also the national climate that influences how those dynamics are interpreted, discussed, and addressed. As political resistance to equity efforts grows, so too does the urgency for protective leadership, inclusive policy, and safe professional spaces that affirm educators' voices rather than silence them.

Limitations

Although this study provides meaningful insight into the lived experiences of African American educators in diverse K–8 school settings, several limitations should be acknowledged in order to analyze the findings within appropriate methodological and contextual boundaries.

Sample Size and Scope

This research utilized a qualitative design involving only 10 participants. While small sample sizes are appropriate for thematic analysis, the results are not intended to be statistically generalizable. The aim was to show patterns and themes based on rich, narrative data rather than to make universal claims. Nonetheless, the restricted sample may not fully capture the variability of experiences among African American educators working in different regions, school

structures, or community contexts. The focus on the tri-state area of New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut may also limit applicability to educators in rural areas, other states, or school systems with different demographic and policy profiles.

Additionally, although the sample included both male and female participants, the male participants generally provided less detailed and emotionally expansive responses. This disparity may be understood through Majors and Billson's (1992) concept of the *cool pose*, in which Black men adopt a guarded, controlled exterior, a sort of emotional mask, to manage social stress and avoid exposing vulnerability. This cultural posture may have influenced the depth of sharing among male participants, particularly around topics like emotional burnout or administrative support. Future research should intentionally seek a larger and more diverse group of male African American educators, along with using methods that create enough psychological safety to allow more open expression. Doing so could deepen understanding of how gendered cultural norms intersect with race and shape teacher retention and well-being.

Self-Selection Bias

Participants volunteered to be part of the study, which introduces the possibility of self-selection bias. Educators who chose to participate may have had more pressing concerns or stronger emotional responses to the subject matter, particularly if they were already considering leaving the profession. As a result, the findings may overrepresent experiences of marginalization. While this potential bias was mitigated by purposeful sampling strategies aimed at capturing a range of voices with both positive and negative outlooks, it is possible that the sample did not reflect the full spectrum of African American teacher experiences.

Reliance on Self-Reported Data

The primary data source for this study was semistructured interviews. While interviews are ideal for exploring personal meaning and capturing firsthand accounts, they are inherently subjective. Participants' recollections may have been shaped by time, emotion, or context. In the absence of specific data, such as classroom observations or leadership evaluations, there is limited ability to confirm or contrast participants' narratives with external indicators. This does not diminish the truth of their experiences, but emphasizes the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry.

Experience Skew

Although efforts were made to include educators with varying years of experience, the sample leaned toward veteran teachers, many of whom had taught for over a decade. These educators offered invaluable long-term perspectives on systemic issues, institutional practices, and patterns of exclusion, but had a different lens than novice teachers just entering the profession. The experiences of early-career African American educators, particularly in navigating onboarding, mentorship, or induction programs, may be underrepresented in the findings.

Researcher Positionality

Due to my professional experience in education and strong commitment to equity-focused leadership, researcher positionality was inevitably present in the study. While every effort was made to uphold fidelity to participants' voices, the interpretation of data was unavoidably shaped by my personal lens. Specifically, my identity as a White male conducting a study centered on African American educators introduced important theoretical considerations. Although the intent was to center participant narratives and resist imposing interpretive bias, my

worldview, cultural positioning, and professional background inevitably informed the framing of questions, analysis of responses, and construction of themes.

Rather than presenting this as a deficit, I approached positionality as a form of reflexive strength. Transparency about my identity and standpoint allowed for continuous reflection throughout the study, ensuring greater sensitivity to power dynamics and the importance of amplifying underrepresented voices. Nevertheless, readers should interpret the findings with awareness of this context. Future research led by African American scholars, or conducted in collaborative teams with racially diverse researchers, may offer further insight and validation of the concepts explored in this work.

Scope of Inquiry

The study was primarily focused on African American educators working in diverse K–8 schools. Some participants had also worked in predominantly White schools for a period of time, but this dimension was not explored in depth, as it fell outside the study's central focus. It was mentioned briefly in Chapter 4, but was not extensively discussed in chapter 5.

Despite the narrower scope, the study remains an important contribution to the conversation around teacher attrition, racial equity in schools, and the systemic conditions that impact retention. It introduces a conceptual framework, African American equity gap attrition, that invites further inquiry and provides a theoretical lens through which the compounding effects of institutional neglect and racialized workplace experiences can be examined.

Overlap

Another limitation of this study involved the natural overlap between themes that emerged during data analysis. While thematic analysis strives to distill distinct patterns from participant narratives, many responses intersected multiple thematic categories. For example,

discussions around burnout were often intertwined with comments on administrative support or racial identity, making it difficult to assign singular meaning to isolated quotes. Thus, some comments appear for more than one theme. This overlap may affect the perceived clarity or separation between themes, but it also highlights the multifaceted nature of African American teacher attrition and the complexity of participants' lived experiences, particularly in diverse school environments where professional, emotional, and identity-based challenges are deeply interconnected. Future research may benefit from exploring these intersections more explicitly, such as through an intersectionality lens or mixed-methods approaches, to better understand how overlapping factors contribute to teacher departure in nuanced and compounded ways.

Recommendations

This section offers targeted recommendations based on the experiences of African American educators working in diverse K–8 schools, organized into three categories: recommendations for practice, recommendations for policy, and recommendations for future research. Together, these recommendations aim to inform a more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable approach to educator support and equity in schools.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings from this study have clear, urgent implications for school and district-level practices aimed at improving the retention and well-being of African American educators in diverse K–8 settings. These recommendations are grounded in the lived realities shared by participants and framed by the study's central concept of African American equity gap attrition. Addressing these issues is essential for building equitable, sustainable school systems. The recommendations are presented in five categories that emerged directly from participant data.

Invest in Meaningful, Culturally Responsive Leadership Training

A recurring theme across interviews was the lack of meaningful administrative support. Participants described school leaders who were disengaged, culturally unaware, or unresponsive to staff needs. To address this, educational leadership development programs should include ongoing training in culturally responsive practices, antiracist leadership, and equity-centered decision making. Administrators must be equipped to recognize microaggressions, affirm teacher identities, and foster inclusive school cultures.

Strengthen Peer Mentorship and Support Structures

Formal mentorship programs, when available, were often misaligned with participants' realities or provided without cultural sensitivity. Participants described the importance of informal mentorship, often built through shared experiences, cultural connection, or community ties. Districts and schools should formalize these networks into structured, protected mentorship models that pair early-career educators with more experienced peers who understand the nuanced dynamics of navigating the profession. These structures must be intentional, adequately funded, and shielded from administrative interference.

Establish Transparent Pathways for Advancement

Participants frequently expressed frustration with vague and inequitable promotion processes. Many had applied for leadership or coaching positions only to be overlooked in favor of external candidates, often White, without clear justification. Schools and districts must create transparent pipelines for career advancement that intentionally address racial disparities. This includes publicizing all leadership opportunities, clearly outlining qualifications and expectations, and ensuring diverse hiring committees that reflect the populations served. African American educators should feel as if they have equal opportunities for advancement.

Improve School Climate with Ongoing Equity Audits

Toxic school climates were cited as one of the most emotionally draining aspects of participants' experiences. These environments, characterized by distrust, silencing, and fear of retaliation, are incompatible with retention. To address this, districts must implement regular equity audits that examine staff demographics, turnover rates, internal survey data, and cultural climate indicators. These audits should be facilitated by external equity partners when possible, or diversity committee members, to ensure neutrality and honesty. Action plans must follow audits, with timelines, accountability mechanisms, and public reporting.

Reduce Workload and Acknowledge Emotional Labor

Participants spoke about the emotional and physical toll of their work. For many African American educators, the workload extended beyond instructional responsibilities into unrecognized equity labor, such as mentoring students of color, leading diversity initiatives, or serving as unofficial cultural translators for families and colleagues. To retain these educators, schools must implement policies that formally acknowledge and compensate for this labor. Workload expectations should be revisited, planning periods protected, and emotional support embedded in day-to-day operations. Stipends should be worked into the budget to further incentivize and reward teachers for going above and beyond.

Recommendations for Policy

Addressing the systemic issues contributing to African American equity gap attrition requires more than school-based reforms; it demands deliberate policy action at the district and state levels. This section offers recommendations aimed at reshaping the policies that govern educator recruitment, retention, and advancement, with a focus on ensuring racial equity in the teaching profession. These suggestions reflect the experiences of participants and call for

structural changes that can better support African American educators across K–8 educational settings.

Require Equity-Centered Leadership Standards

State departments of education should embed equity competencies into administrator certification requirements. This includes mandating training in racial equity, implicit bias, culturally responsive leadership, and inclusive hiring practices. Licensing bodies must hold districts accountable for employing leaders who are prepared to support diverse school communities.

Fund and Incentivize Mentorship for Educators of Color

Federal and state education agencies can allocate targeted funds to develop mentorship programs specifically for educators of color. These should be designed and led by experienced teachers who share cultural backgrounds with their mentees. Grants or policy incentives should support districts in sustaining long-term, culturally supportive mentorship initiatives.

Collect and Publicly Report Disaggregated Retention Data

Policymakers should require districts to track and publicly report teacher retention data disaggregated by race, gender, and school context. This data collection would help identify patterns of attrition, spotlight schools or districts with disproportionately high turnover among teachers of color, and guide targeted interventions.

Prioritize Internal Mobility and Leadership Pipelines

District policies should prioritize the development and promotion of internal candidates, particularly African American educators, into leadership roles. Clear advancement policies, transparent hiring practices, and leadership development programs should be institutionalized to counteract exclusionary promotion practices uncovered in this study.

Provide Financial Incentives for Retention in High-Need Schools

To address the racialized attrition patterns seen in underresourced schools, state and federal agencies should fund retention bonuses, student loan forgiveness, or salary differentials for African American educators working in these schools. These policies should be designed to not only attract but also retain experienced teachers of color in the schools that need them most.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon the insights and boundaries of the limitations section, several pathways for future research are worth consideration. First, while this study focused on African American educators in diverse K–8 public school settings, further research could expand to include high schools, rural schools, or private and charter institutions to determine whether patterns of African American equity gap attrition persist across contexts. Comparative studies examining the experiences of African American educators across different school types or regions could examine more systemic patterns versus the smaller scale of this study.

Additionally, future research could explore the perspectives of school leaders, district administrators, or policymakers and how decisions about hiring, retention, and school culture are made. A two-sided analysis could further clarify where breakdowns in communication or cultural awareness occur and how they might be repaired.

Also, longitudinal studies that follow African American educators over time could yield valuable insight into the cumulative nature of institutional fatigue, burnout, and attrition. This would also provide a perspective into how shifts in the social and political landscape over time affect these educators. Understanding not only why teachers leave, but when and how their departure becomes likely would be key in designing more effective interventions.

More research is needed on the impact of mentorship and culturally relevant leadership models. Future studies might investigate how mentorship from leaders of similar backgrounds, or training in culturally responsive practices, influences the career trajectories and workplace satisfaction of African American educators.

Lastly, as this study introduced the concept of African American equity gap attrition, future research can continue to test, refine, and expand this framework across different racial, ethnic, and professional contexts. Scholars might explore whether similar patterns of identity-based pushout affect other marginalized teacher groups and whether African American equity gap attrition offers a useful comparative lens for understanding attrition more broadly.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of African American educators working in diverse K–8 schools, uncovering a complex landscape shaped by race, leadership, systemic inequities, and identity. Through six emergent themes, the data revealed how underrepresentation, institutional neglect, emotional fatigue, and professional stagnation intersect to create a challenging and often unsustainable path. These findings add new depth to our understanding of teacher attrition by shifting the lens from individual burnout to systemic design.

At the center of this shift is the introduction of African American equity gap attrition, a term developed to describe the identity-specific, cumulative conditions that push African American educators out of the profession. Rather than viewing attrition as an inevitable outcome of challenging school environments, this study reframes it as a preventable consequence of structural exclusion and racialized professional experiences. African American equity gap attrition offers both a diagnostic and conceptual framework for future practice, policy, and inquiry.

The findings imply that retaining Black educators cannot be reduced to recruitment efforts alone. It requires transformation at every level, from school culture and leadership practices to policy structures and mentorship pathways. When African American educators are excluded from leadership pipelines, subjected to toxic work climates, and tasked with invisible emotional labor, the loss is institutional and deeply consequential for students, schools, and communities.

By combining the voices of those most affected, this study contributes to a growing call for educational systems that affirm, support, and retain African American educators. It invites school leaders, policymakers, and researchers to move beyond symbolic inclusion and toward sustainable, equity-driven change. The findings and recommendations presented are not the end of the conversation, but they are the foundation for what comes next.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Question Set for Current Teachers

1. Can you provide a brief overview of your educational background, including any specialized training or certifications related to teaching?

2. What grades and subjects do you teach, and how many years of teaching experience do you have in total?

3. Can you provide insight into what prompted your decision to think about leaving the teaching profession or consider transitioning to a different career path?

4. Are there any specific challenges or obstacles related to your identity as an African American teacher that contributed to your decision to contemplate leaving?

5. Can you recall any incidents or experiences within the educational system that significantly influenced your thoughts on leaving the teaching profession?

6. In your experience, how effective have mentorship and administrative support been in addressing the attrition of African American teachers?
A. What improvements could be made in these areas?

7. Reflecting on your time as a teacher, are there any changes or initiatives within the educational system that you believe could have helped retain African American educators?

8. Have you encountered instances of bias, discrimination, or lack of representation within the teaching profession that contributed to your thoughts on leaving?
A. How are these factors impacting your commitment to teaching?
B. Were any steps taken by your school to address these issues?

9. Looking back, do you feel there were missed opportunities or support systems that could have influenced your feelings on teaching? If so, what were they?
A. How would you implement such support?

10. How do you envision the future of African American representation within the teaching profession?
A. What steps do you believe are necessary to achieve this, particularly in addressing attrition rates?

11. Is there any additional insight or perspective you would like to share regarding your experiences as an African American teacher and the challenges you faced leading to attrition?

Appendix B: Interview Question Set for Former Teachers

1. Can you provide a brief overview of your educational background, including any specialized training or certifications related to teaching?

2. What grades and subjects did you teach during your time as an educator, and how many years of teaching experience do you have in total?

3. Can you provide insight into what prompted your decision to leave the teaching profession or consider transitioning to a different career path?

4. Were there any specific challenges or obstacles related to your identity as an African American teacher that contributed to your decision to leave teaching?

5. Can you recall any incidents or experiences within the educational system that significantly influenced your choice to leave the teaching profession?

6. How do you perceive the role of culturally responsive professional development programs in addressing the attrition of African American teachers?
A. In what ways can professional development be improved or extended?
B. Have you personally benefited from such programs?

7. In your experience, how effective have mentorship and administrative support been in addressing the attrition of African American teachers?
A. What improvements could be made in these areas?

8. Reflecting on your time as a teacher, are there any changes or initiatives within the educational system that you believe could have helped retain African American educators like yourself?

9. Have you encountered instances of bias, discrimination, or lack of representation within the teaching profession that contributed to your decision to leave?
A. How did these factors impact your commitment to teaching?
B. Were any steps taken by your school to address these issues?

10. Looking back, do you feel there were missed opportunities or support systems that could have influenced your decision to stay in the profession? If so, what were they?
A. How would you implement such support?

11. How do you envision the future of African American representation within the teaching profession?
A. What steps do you believe are necessary to achieve this, particularly in addressing attrition rates?

12. Is there any additional insight or perspective you would like to share regarding your experiences as an African American teacher and the challenges you faced leading to attrition?

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