

STILL MISSING IN ACTION: THE PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
WOMEN ABOUT THE BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES IN ASCENDING TO THE  
SUPERINTENDENCY IN NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Dissertation  
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Abstract

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In North Carolina, women represent the largest number of teachers and a large percentage of building and district level administrators, but remain underrepresented in the superintendent position. The African American female's presence in the top administrative position is almost non-existent. Nationally the situation is quite similar. In order to begin to understand the phenomenon of African American women missing in action from the superintendent role in North Carolina public schools, it is important to examine the constructs that obstruct their ascension to the position. What are their perceptions of their barriers and challenges encountered in route to the superintendency? Why were there only two African American female superintendents serving in North Carolina schools during the 2007-2008 school year? What are the lived experiences of district level administrators that helped them ascend to their current positions? What is preventing them from exiting the pipeline to the superintendency? This study draws upon literature that examined the historical perspective of women, particularly Black women in education, along with early

personal and professional experiences and influences; institutional, cultural and societal barriers; the selection process and formal and informal networks and support systems.

This qualitative study examined the phenomenon of small numbers of African American women ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina through the perceptions of barriers and challenges encountered in route to the position by ten African American female district administrators. This study also sought to draw on Black feminist theory explanations for the under representation of African American women in the superintendency. This theoretical model analyzes the impact of gender *and* racial discrimination or what is more commonly referred to as the “double whammy.”

The findings indicate that North Carolina public school administration is a reflection of historical, institutional, cultural and political constructs and practices that determine the destiny of the African American female. Implications for educational leadership training institutions, North Carolina legislators, Boards of Education and other African American female administrators are identified. Recommendations for further research are discussed.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my wonderful husband and best friend of 30 years, Larry, thank you for loving me unconditionally, dirty dishes and all. To two of the best sons in the world, Ryan and Clayton, thank you for helping me “keep it real.” And to Sophie, my furry friend, thanks for staying with me through late nights and early mornings. I love you guys!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful and humbled to have the opportunity to thank the special people in my life without whom this journey would have been impossible. I am most appreciative to the ten study participants for their willingness to provide voice to my study. A special thank you for opening your lives to me.

To Dr. Killacky, chair of my committee, words are not adequate enough to express my sincere gratitude and thanks. Thank you for never saying “if” and always saying “when.” Your guidance and support provided direction to my journey. Thank you for helping me find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, in true Irish style. To my committee, Dr. Coleman, Dr. Hall, Dr. Angel and Dr. Treadaway, thank you for having faith in me and staying the course, even when my route was sometimes wandering and unknown.

Cohort 11 colleagues, thanks for the memories, especially Kathy, Trudi and Stephen, my “road dawgs.” What a ride and I enjoyed every mile of it. My experience on the Globe Road will be cherished forever. Adrienne, Ashley, Bonnie, Christy and Pat, thanks for holding things down in the office when I needed time to write. Karla thanks for providing me with an understanding ear while listening to me vent. Dr. Church, my personal technology assistant, what can I say? Your words of wisdom, encouragement, and technical assistance, not to mention your comic relief will always hold a special place in my heart. To my parents, thanks for giving me life and love. And last but not least, to my family, immediate and extended, thanks for understanding my absence over the past years. I’m back!

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### *Introduction to the Issue*

Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. I look for a large majority of the big cities to follow the lead of Chicago in choosing a woman for superintendent. In the near future, we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system. It is women's natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership. As the first woman to be placed in control of the schools of a big city, it will be my aim to prove that no mistakes have been made and to show cities and friends alike that a woman is better qualified for this work than a man.

Ella Flagg Young 1909 (Blount, 1998, p. 1)

One hundred years later, Young's vision of school leadership for women has not been realized. According to available, yet limited data, women in 2006 accounted for approximately 21% of the superintendents nationwide (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). This figure is nowhere near the majority that Young had envisioned in 1909. There is minimal information about women superintendents because most of the literature is based on men's experiences in this executive position (Skrla & Hoyle, 1999). The limited number of female school superintendents, coupled with the limited amount of literature and research about females as superintendents, has created a gap in what we know about who these women are, where they are and the barriers and challenges they experience in ascending to the superintendency (Alston, 2000).

The superintendency is a complex political position that is often referred to as a gender stratified executive position (Bjork, 2000), with men 40 times more likely than women to advance from teaching to the top leadership position within a school district (Skrla & Hoyle, 1999). In the recent data from the American Association of School Administrators, Glass and Franceschini (2007) report 21% of school superintendents were female and 2% of that population were identified as African American female. During the 2007-2008 school year in North Carolina, 10.43% of the superintendents were female and 1.73%, two were African American (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009)

Feminist research on school leadership has documented the persistent under representation of women in the school district's top leadership position (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). The under representation of women in the superintendency has prompted researchers to investigate the reasons why more women are not superintendents (Bjork, Glass & Brunner, 2000). According to Grogan and Henry (1995) and Brunner (1998), gender is viewed as a major factor in why women are not represented in the ranks of the superintendency. Black feminist theory concludes that under representation of the Black woman in society cannot be identified as a gender only issue (Hill-Collins, 1990). The issue of race must enter into the conversation about the African American female. Therefore, I found it useful to explore African American women's experiences and perceptions of barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency with a Black feminist lens.

The National Commission on Glass Ceilings (1991) identified the under representation of women in top executive positions in the workplace as glass ceiling effect. Alston (1999) described the ceiling as concrete, not glass, if the woman on the other side of the ceiling is a Black woman. Grogan (1999) pointed out that the African American female

aspiring to the superintendent's position in public schools must tread through deep waters of disbeliefs held about race and gender. Andrews and Simpson (1995) referred to the phenomena of race and gender concerns for African American women as the "double whammy" effect.

It has only been in the last 30 years that women superintendents have been studied (Tallerico, 1999). From a historical perspective, studies and available data on the public school superintendent have focused primarily on the white male (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). According to Brunner and Grogan, the study of women in the superintendency is a recent phenomenon. Studies in the past that focused on white men used information gathered to generalize experiences of the school superintendent both to women and persons of color (Shakeshaft, 1989). Brunner, (2000b) stated that the investigation of women superintendents has been a neglected area of research and that an examination of the position from a female perspective should be priority in the field.

Chase and Bell (1995) noted that several state departments of education, university departments of education and some state legislators had publicly identified the under representation of females in the superintendency as a problem. They began early conversations in the literature, which included suggestions on how to resolve the problem of under representation of women in the field. Jackson (1999) asserted that up to that point, no one had compiled accurate, complete, and dependable information on women superintendents. Unreliable statistics and available data on women superintendents, paired with the small number of women in the superintendency, have deterred many interested researchers from investigating the female superintendent experience (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999).

More disturbing than the overall inequity between male and female representation in the superintendency is the sparse numbers of African American women who reach the superintendent position in public schools. Hansot and Tyack (1982) reported that minorities seldom obtained positions as superintendents prior to the 1960s. Alston (2000) chronicled the career experience of Jeanes supervisors. These supervisors were described as African American women who served as de facto superintendents until the 1960s. According to Alston (2000), these women had many of the same responsibilities as school superintendents and worked under the direct supervision of the white male local superintendent, only they worked in segregated African American schools.

Over the next decades, court decisions would mandate changes in the classrooms that also affected the administrative offices of America's public schools as well as opportunities for women and minority educators (Toppo, 2004). Ironically, Brown vs. the Board of Education, the decision that would render *separate but equal* unconstitutional and lead to the desegregation of America's schools, resulted in the loss of African American male and female teachers and administrators (Toppo, 2004). The decision resulted in an end to the employment of Jeanes supervisors (Alston, 2000). Many African American teachers were not afforded an opportunity to teach in desegregated schools after the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision (Toppo, 2004). African American administrators were demoted to subordinate, frequently non-administrative positions within newly desegregated school districts. A return of men from wars meant that more men were entering the workforce, further reducing the need for female workers including women as school administrators (Jones, 2003).

Researchers assumed that findings from studies conducted with white males as participants would be used to generalize and help with understanding the experiences of females and persons of color in school leadership positions (Shakeshaft, 1989). According to Shakeshaft, even though these studies provided valuable information relative to the career pathways, challenges and successes of those in the superintendency, there is still a need to present the superintendent experience from a female and female person of color perspective. There is still concern that the voices of the under represented women and women of color are still not included in the literature (Brunner, Opsal, & Oliva, 2006). According to Shakeshaft (1999), not only is the African American woman missing physically from the office of the superintendent, the specific research that examines the perceptions and attitudes of African American women school administrators is missing as well. In North Carolina not only is there is a gap in the number of African American women serving as district level administrators and the number actually serving as superintendents, but there is also a gap in the literature as well as our knowledge of why they are missing.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Alston (2000) asked two questions: 1) where are the Black female superintendents, and 2) why are they missing in action from the superintendency. Newton (2006) pointed out that educational organizations erect barriers and structures that limit career advancement and opportunities for women, particularly women of color. These organizational and institutional barriers often lock women into lower level, lower paying jobs. The literature has identified these barriers and structures as:

- 1) the glass ceiling (Baxter, Wright, and Birkelund, 2000) and concrete ceiling (Alston, 1999) as they relate to workplace discrimination in the areas of promotion and salary (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, and Vannerman, 2001);
- 2) societal and cultural barriers related to stereotypical views of beliefs and practices within society as they relate to women in the work force (Howard-Hamilton, 2003);
- 3) institutional and organizational barriers related to gates and barriers erected by organizations limiting the female and persons of color ascension to higher rungs of authority within the organization (Tallerico, 2000);
- 4) career pathway decisions related to education preparation and formal training, along with employment experiences in school administration (Bjork et al., 2000);
- 5) mentoring, sponsorships, formal and information networks and how they impact the ability to ascend to higher positions within organizations (Allen & Jacobson, 1995); and
- 6) selection processes and board of education involvement (Tallerico, 2000).

A review of the literature reveals that there is a limited amount of research on African American women in the superintendency (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Early limited studies primarily examined the role of the African American female school superintendent by providing descriptions of who she was, where she was from, demographics of the district she served, educational background and training, along with a description of her leadership style (Brunner, 2000b). The small number of studies on African American women who served as superintendents provided descriptions of the qualities and characteristics of the women who have been able to ascend to the position of superintendent (Jackson, 1999). Jackson examined the experiences of 73 current and former African American female superintendents. As a result of interviews and surveys conducted with the study participants

from across the United States, four common themes emerged. Jackson (1999) termed these themes as success factors. Alston (1999) also conducted a study on African American female superintendents in order to identify constraints and facilitators that they experienced in route to the superintendency. From the study, she identified five factors as being moderately or greatly constraining in the participant's ascension to the superintendency. Jackson's themes of success factors and Alston's constraint and facilitator factors were used to provide the conceptual framework of this study.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of African American female district level administrators about barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools. Perceptions of the study participants were examined with a focus on early personal experiences and influences along with the experiences of the subjects as district level administrators. This study identified the challenges and barriers in ascending to the superintendency as perceived by subjects serving in district leadership positions who are described as in the pipeline to the superintendency.

The primary research question is:

What are the perceptions of African American women about their barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools?

The secondary questions are:

- 1) Why are so few African American women ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools?
- 2) What are the lived experiences of these women that effect who they are as leaders?

### *Methodology Overview*

This phenomenological study included ten African American female district level public school administrators from the Piedmont, Southeastern, and Eastern regions of North Carolina. Seven of the participants were selected from the North Carolina Personnel Administrators' database. Two of the participants were referrals from other study participants, and one was a referral from a former colleague of the participant. Participants were selected based on current job assignment and educational credentials held.

A qualitative research approach was used to examine the participants' perceptions about barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools. Individual interviews were conducted which allowed participants an opportunity to speak from personal experiences, thereby allowing their individual realities an opportunity to emerge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### *Significance of the Study*

African American women continue to make up a significant percentage of the district level administrators in North Carolina public schools. They serve as supervisors, directors, assistant and associate superintendents. In 2008, in North Carolina public schools, 56% of district level supervisors, directors and assistant or associate superintendents were identified as women. Twenty-one percent were identified as African American women (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009). Based on what we know about public education career pathways and pipelines and the number of African American women employed as public school superintendents in North Carolina, the questions posed by Alston (1999), where are the African American female superintendents and why and why are they missing in action, are still relevant in North Carolina public schools today. This study examined the

perceptions of African American women about their barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools. An identification and examination of these perceived barriers and challenges will add to the literature and conversations on African American women and the superintendency. This study also identified implications for educators, legislators and African American women and provided recommendations for further research.

#### Definition of Key Terms

**Androcentric:** The practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing male human beings or the masculine point of view at the center of one's view of the world and its culture and history (Grogan, 1999).

**Barrier:** Anything that prevents entrance, obstructs passage, retards progress or demarcates.

**Building Level Administrator:** Identified as the principal, assistant principal or school administrator responsible for the day-to-day operation and management of the school building.

**Career Pathways:** A coherent sequence of rigorous employment experiences that prepare one for success at the next level of leadership (Tallerico, 2000)

**Challenges:** To call to question; to object to; a formal objection or exception to a person or thing; to dispute, query, contest, doubt (*Webster's New International Dictionary, 2002 Edition*).

**Concrete Ceiling Effect:** Identified by Alston (1999) as barriers that limit or block access to what lies beyond the ceiling; barriers are identified as societal and cultural role definition and expectations; organizational and institutional barriers; educational preparation and career pathway experiences; leadership styles; and mentor/support and networking systems.

**Constructs: That which** is built or developed by mental synthesis.

**District Level Administrator:** Identified as program director; assistant or associate superintendent; individual who is responsible for district level program administration and/or assists the superintendent in the daily management of the school system.

**Gender Structuring:** The practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing male human beings or the masculine point of view at the center of one's view of the world and its culture (Fox-Keller, 1985).

**Glass Ceiling Effect:** Defined by the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission as the existence of an impermeable barrier that blocks the vertical mobility of women.

**Institutional and Organizational Barriers:** Workplace structures that create gates and barriers for those who aspire to ascend to higher levels of leadership.

**Jeanes Supervisor:** From 1930 through 1954, described as college educated, mostly Black females, who were sent into southern states to assist in improving educational conditions and to perform the administrative duties for the county superintendent.

**Leader:** Individual chosen to guide, or manage schools and school systems.

**Formal/Informal Professional Networks:** System of professional relationships, contacts and connections that work to enhance career advancement.

**Perceptions:** The mental grasp of objects, etc. through the senses.

**Pipeline:** Career pathway; entryway or gateway to next leadership level within an organization.

**Qualitative interviewing:** Guided conversation in which the researcher carefully listens “so as to hear the meaning” of what is being conveyed (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.7).

**School Chief Executive Officer (CEO):** Identified as the superintendent of the school system; the individual responsible for the daily management and operations of the school system.

**Societal and Cultural Barriers:** Stereotypical views of individuals based on psychological and sociological factors.

### Organization of Study

In North Carolina public schools, African American women made up 21% of district level administrators in 2008, but only 1.73% of the superintendents (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009). In spite of the number of African American women serving in high profile, district leadership positions, only a few ascend to the superintendency. Research supports that career pathways and pipelines are natural conduits to upper level management in this case, administration positions. Yet African American women are not making that transition at a rate even close to the level they serve in other district leadership positions. Limited research is available that details the perceptions and attitudes of African American females about ascending to the superintendency. This study is an attempt to address what we know about African American women as district leaders and what we do not know about perceived barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina from a Black female perspective.

Chapter I provided an introduction and a rationale for this study. Chapter II reviews the current literature and presents the conceptual framework utilized in this study. Chapter III describes the methods used to conduct this study.

Chapter IV explains the data analysis process and the results obtained from the study.

Chapter V presents a discussion of the findings, the implications for both theory and practice along with suggestions for further study.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

### *Overview of Literature*

The American belief in a meritocratic system that provides opportunities for all people based on demonstrated talent and ability is flawed (Kingston, 2004). Kingston suggests that this flaw is best demonstrated in public school administration where highly trained, fully licensed African American women are ascending to the superintendency in very small numbers in public schools. This study focused on the perceptions of African American women about the barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools. The disparity between the numbers of African American women employed as district level directors, assistant or associate superintendents, in comparison to the number of African American women employed as superintendents in North Carolina public schools creates a knowledge gap. This gap in knowledge exists between what we do know about school leadership preparation, and traditional career pathways, and the number of African American women in the pipeline to the superintendency versus what we do not know about why there are so few African American women ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina.

This literature review focuses on:

- a review of national and state statistical data available on the superintendency;
- an historical perspective of women, particularly African American women, in school administration since the 18<sup>th</sup> century;
- limited available research on African American women as school leaders;

- institutional, societal and political barriers perceived to impede ascension to the superintendency;
- educational preparation, career pathways and experiences as they relate to being prepared for the position; and
- networks, support systems and mentoring for aspiring leaders.

*Review of National and State Statistical Data*

Bjork et al. (2000) in the *State of the American School Superintendency* study reported that in 1998 there were 14,000 superintendent positions in the nation. Women at that time held 15-18% of the superintendent positions. Two percent of the superintendent positions nationwide in 1998, were held by African American women. Glass and Franceschini (2007) in the most recent *State of the American Superintendent* study identified 14,063 superintendent positions in the country. Of the 1,338 superintendents participating in the 2006 study, it was noted that 21.7% of superintendents were women. This sample population was described by Glass and Franceschini (2007) as a reasonable sample of the entire population. Nationally, in 2007, 85% of the public school teachers were women (Pytel, 2006).

In North Carolina, the disparity between men and women in the superintendency is paradoxical because the field of education is an enterprise within the state in which women are a majority of the workforce. In 2008, women made up 80% of the teacher workforce in North Carolina (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009). In that same year, 18% of the superintendents were women and 1.73% of the superintendents were African American women.

Figure 1 provides statistical data on certified female employees, by assignment in North Carolina schools during the 2007-2008 school year.

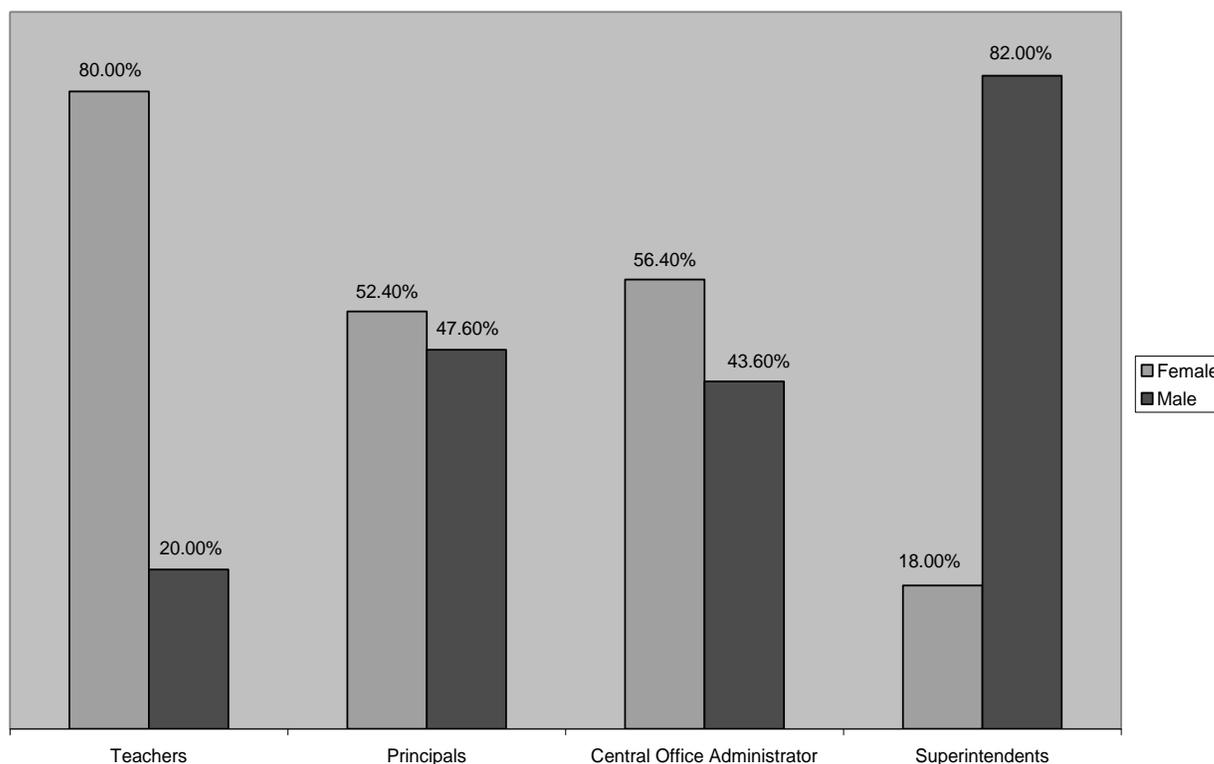


Figure 1. 2007-2008 certified employees by assignment in North Carolina Schools.

These reported data point out the disparity in the presence of women between the classroom and superintendent's office. While the representation of women in all levels of school administration has increased over the past decade, patterns of representation indicate that little significant progress has been made towards women accessing the top executive district position (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). In order to better understand the involvement of women in superintendent roles today, it is critical that we examine within the literature the early accounts of women in school leadership positions.

*An Historical Perspective of Women in Education.*

The U.S Census Bureau has characterized the superintendency as the mostly male dominated executive position of any profession in the United States (Glass, 1992). Even though the characterization is more than 17 years old, based on current available data in North Carolina and nationwide, this characterization of the public school superintendent is still accurate. Traditional thinking might logically conclude that the traditional pathway to the superintendency is from the classroom to building level administrator (assistant principal/principal), to central office administrator and then to the superintendency for those who aspire to it (Glass & Franceschini, 2007); however, available data reveal otherwise.

Since the mid 1800s, when the public school superintendent's position came into existence few women, as compared to men, have been afforded the opportunity to hold that leadership position (Shakeshaft, 1999). In 1909, Ella Flagg Young was the first female appointed superintendent of a major city school system (Blount, 1998). Young, served as superintendent of Chicago City Schools from 1909 until her retirement in 1915. Enthusiasm and momentum among women's activists were building at this time mainly because within 50 years women had progressed from having few means of employment outside of the home to now dominating their new profession of teaching. This newfound profession, by 1900, identified 70% of all the teachers nationwide as female (Blount, 1998). It was hoped that women's entry into formal school leadership positions could not be too far behind (Blount, 1998).

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of women succeeded in attaining school leadership positions during what was called the golden age for women administrators (Hansot & Tyack, 1982). During this time, school districts added formal bureaucratic

structures and administrative layers, a move that resulted in an abundance of administrative positions. Women were able to move into these positions, becoming lead teachers, teaching principals, supervisors, mid-level administrators and sometimes superintendents (Hansot & Tyack, 1982). Attainment of a superintendent's position was considered a very important goal for women because it was a position from which they could build considerable educational influence and it symbolized increasing social, political and economic power for the woman.

According to Blount (1998), in 1909 women accounted for 9% of all Superintendents, even though they primarily served in small or rural county school districts typically deemed undesirable by men. This golden age continued until after World War II in spite of economic depression and a movement against women's social and political advances (Hansot & Tyack, 1982). From the end of the war until around 1970, women's representation in most school administrative positions declined quietly, yet rapidly (Hansot & Tyack, 1982).

The percentage of women superintendents fell from 9% to 3% during the decades between World War II and 1970. In 1930, 11% of the superintendents were women. The numbers dipped back to nine percent in 1950 and plummeted to 1.3% in 1971. The numbers remained low until climbing to almost 7% in 1992 (Glass, 1992) and doubling to 13.2% in 1999, the highest level in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bjork et al., 2000).

Blount (1998) points out that all of the studies she reviewed that identified the number of women superintendents were based on limited surveys rather than comprehensive tallies. In many instances, others have found it difficult to retrieve current and accurate information on the number of women superintendents (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

According to Hansot and Tyack (1982), the absence of a database of women in administrative roles did not happen by mistake, but has a historical precedent:

Amid proliferation of other kinds of statistical reporting in an age enamored of numbers---reports so detailed that one could give the precise salary of staff in every community across the country and exact information on all sorts of other variables--- data by sex has become strangely inaccessible. A conspiracy of silence could hardly have been unintentional. (p. 13)

This conspiracy of silence has made it difficult to determine women's, particularly African American women's, representation in school administration. According to the most recent report by Glass and Franceschini (2007), the most current and available database does not identify superintendents by race and gender, only by race or gender. A review of limited available literature on African American women in school leadership roles provided an historical perspective of the role of Black women in public school administration.

*An Historical Perspective of the African American Female and School Administration*

The literature on superintendents continues to be silent for women and largely represents the white male (Brunner, 2000b). Research that focuses solely on African American women is almost non-existent; however, there is a small developing body of literature focused primarily on women and people of color as school leaders (Brunner, 2000b; Grogan, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989). Research about women of color in education administration over the last 20 years has focused on themes of 1) under-representation of women of color in educational leadership roles, 2) limited to no representation of women of color in educational thought and theory and 3) barriers that limit or discourage these women's successful ascension into the superintendent's position (Alston, 1999). The lack of

published research specifically about African American female superintendents is further evidence that Black women are scarcely represented in the superintendency ranks (Brunner, 2000b). According to Jackson (1999), prior to 1995 the number of African American female superintendents in the United States never reached 50 in any given year. In 2000, the total number of superintendents serving in school districts across the nation was approximately 14,500 (Bjork, et al., 2000). 15-18% were identified as female and 2% were identified as African American female.

Revere (1989) noted that before 1956, the fact that Black female superintendents even existed was obscured in the literature. One exception that Revere found was Velma Dolphin Ashley, an African American woman who headed the Boley Oklahoma school district from 1944 until 1956. In the 1970s, three African American female administrators journeyed to the top of urban school district leadership. Edith Gaines headed schools in Hartford, Connecticut; Margaret Labat, led Evanston, Illinois schools; and amid a wave of controversy and attention, Barbara Sizemore took the helm of the Washington, DC schools (Revere, 1987). By 1978, the ranks of African American female superintendents nationwide had increased to five (Arnex, 1981). In 1982, there were 11 Black female superintendents, 16 in 1983, 29 in 1984 and 25 in 1985 (Revere, 1987).

The literature on African American females in school leadership though sparse in published research, is rich with unpublished dissertations addressing concerns for the lack of African American female leadership in the superintendent's role. Adams (1990) conducted a study to determine whether or not there have been specific enculturation factors in African American female superintendents' personal and family lives that were viewed as helpful in their preparation for administrative advancement. The study revealed that the following

themes were common between the subjects and felt by the subjects to contribute to their professional success and preparation for administrative advancement:

- 1) coming from an intact small family,
- 2) having a network of supportive schoolteachers,
- 3) forging relationships with numerous mentors, and
- 4) being steeped in the traditional ethic of the African American Baptist church.

Alston (1996) studied the perceptions of constraints and facilitators encountered in route to the superintendency. The result of the study revealed one reoccurring pattern, that being the need for experience coupled with education in order for African American women to gain a superintendent position.

Dunlap and Schmuck (1995) called for setting an agenda to address the lack of women in top school leadership positions. With an intensified focus on the issue of few African American women in top leadership positions, the question then became, what will or should this agenda include (Alston, 2000). Alston asked specifically, how will this agenda help to increase the research on Black women and leadership in education and more importantly, how will this agenda help increase the actual number of Black female superintendents? According to Alston, the agenda must first address the lack of research on women, particularly women of color, as a vehicle for change in public education leadership. Alston (1999) tells us that African American women who aspire to the top administrative position in a school district must be willing to take a circuitous route rather than the pathway followed by the majority of White males, which includes:

- less than seven years in the classroom;
- two to three years as an assistant principal;

- five or less years as a high school principal; and
- five or less years as an assistant or associate superintendent before moving to the superintendency.

Alston points out that the route to the superintendency is not as direct for African American women who generally spend:

- 15 years in the classroom as teacher;
  - five or more years as assistant principal, usually at the elementary level;
  - five or more years as principal, usually at the elementary level;
  - three or more years as coordinator and later director, usually in curriculum areas;
- and
- three or more years as assistant or associate superintendent before becoming superintendent.

Grogan (1996) argued that women are seen as somewhat of an anomaly in the position of superintendent because there are so few serving as superintendents. The reason identified for the lack of women, particularly African American women serving as superintendent, is inequity in selection and appointment of women to the position. She concluded that collaborative efforts between school systems, search agencies and communities must take place in order to bring about real change in equity of position appointment.

Although marginalized in the role of superintendent, the role of African American women in education has been major. Berry (1982) pointed out that many of the contributions to public education in the twentieth century were made by African American women. She further pointed out that Black women's causes have focused primarily on the problems of

educating Black and poor people throughout history. Even though it was illegal for a Black person to be educated until after the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Black women have always been teachers even in secret. African American women during enslavement would hold school from twelve midnight until two o'clock A.M. in an effort to educate other Blacks (Berry, 1982). After the Civil War there was an effort made by the government and philanthropic organizations to provide an education for former slaves (Shakeshaft, 1989). By the early 1900s, African American women were becoming educated at Normal Schools and some universities, and represented about two-thirds of Black teachers (Shakeshaft, 1989). In 1937, funds were established to provide money for education of destitute children, African American children, and African American master teachers (Toppo, 2004).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, teaching was considered one of the top professions held by Black women (Shakeshaft, 1989). By the 1920s, African American women were in the workforce as teachers in greater numbers than their White female counterparts were (Grogan, 2000a). Paralleling the White female educational leadership experience, Black female educators opened their own schools and were both the teachers and administrators (Giddings, 1984). The 1930s brought with it an increase in Jeanes supervisors (Alston, 1999). Jeanes supervisors were college educated, Black females who were sent into southern states, in largely rural areas, to assist in improving educational conditions.

Jeanes supervisors used the methods of Virginia Randolph. Randolph, an African American educator from Virginia, developed programs to upgrade vocational training in schools through the south. These programs placed more emphasis on improvement of instruction by introducing new methods and curriculum, organized, and delivered in-service

training and workshops (Alston & Jones, 2002). Although the Jeanes supervisors reported to and performed administrative duties for county superintendents, who were primarily White males, they were fundamentally de facto superintendents (Alston & Jones, 2002). With no particular set of guidelines to follow and many challenges and obstacles confronting them, these former teachers performed a variety of tasks necessary to improve instruction for African American students (Dale, 1998).

Like modern day superintendents, Jeanes supervisors served as negotiator, crisis handler, resource allocation specialist, disseminator of information, staff developer, and personnel specialist (Sanders, 1999). They also performed duties of attendance officer, enrollment manager, record keeper, and organizer of countywide events (Dale, 1998).

By the mid 1950s, there were more than 500-recorded Jeanes supervisors (Alston & Jones, 2002). Due to both philanthropic southerners and Jeanes supervisors, the largest number of Black females in administrative positions was documented in the south and southwest (Shakeshaft, 1989). Following *Brown versus the Board of Education* and the desegregation of schools, Jeanes supervisors were phased out. Many of the Black and White schools were merged, leaders from the White schools were maintained and Black school leaders were not (Toppo, 2004).

During the 1950s and 1960s, court decisions mandated changes in public education that also changed the landscape of American education from one that had been exclusive to a more inclusive system (Toppo, 2004). In the *Brown versus the Board of Education* decision, the supreme court ordered separate but equal unconstitutional. This decision led to desegregation of schools and the loss of Black teachers and administrators, both male and female. Personnel who had initially taught in segregated all Black schools, found few

opportunities to integrate the schools that children in their communities attended (Toppo, 2004). In 1954, approximately 82,000 Black teachers were responsible for teaching as many as two million Black children. In the eleven years following the Brown decision, more than 38,000 Black teachers and administrators in seventeen southern and border states lost their jobs (Toppo, 2004). Those who were able to secure employment found themselves in subordinate positions and no longer in administrative leadership positions. A negative by-product of this occurrence was that during the 1970s, the number of women in the superintendency across the nation, dropped to 1.3% and remained at a low for nearly a decade (Toppo, 2004). A number of factors may have contributed to this decade decline, including desegregation of public schools, the end of the Vietnam War, and culturally entrenched biases (Jones, 2003).

#### *Institutional, Societal, and Political Barriers and Challenges*

The *Wall Street Journal* (March 1986) in its *Corporate Woman* column, identified a puzzling new phenomenon (Baxter et al., 2000). According to the article, there seemed to be an invisible but impenetrable barrier between a woman and executive positions, preventing her from reaching the top level in the business world regardless of her accomplishments and merits (Baxter et al., 2000). Glass ceiling, first used by the National Commission on Glass Ceilings in 1991, became the term used to describe what happened to women and minorities when they were denied the opportunity to advance to upper levels of executive management because of gender or race (Baxter & Wright). The Department of Labor became involved with identifying and publicizing the glass ceiling problem and issued a report on the *Glass Ceiling* initiative along with the introduction of the Glass Ceiling Act in 1991, also referred to as Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). The

Glass Ceiling Act of 1991 required the establishment of a twenty-one member bipartisan commission with a complex mission of conducting a study and preparing recommendations on eliminating artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities in management and decision-making positions in business (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

Results of the federal study revealed that there are barriers that are rarely penetrated by women or persons of color (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Three levels of artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities were identified as a result of the study. The three levels were:

- 1) societal barriers, which may be outside the direct control of the institution;
- 2) supply barriers as they relate to educational opportunity, attainment and individuals being prepared to enter higher levels of administration; and
- 3) difference barriers as manifested in conscious and unconscious stereotyping, prejudices and biases related to gender, race and ethnicity. (pp. 7-8)

The study further examined institutional or internal barriers that are within the direct control of organizations. The institutional barriers identified included:

- 1) outreach and recruitment practices that do not seek out, reach or recruit minorities and women;
- 2) internal climates that alienate and isolate minorities and women;
- 3) pipeline barriers that directly affect opportunities for advancement;
- 4) initial placement and clustering in staff jobs or in highly technical and professional jobs that are not on the career track to the top;
- 5) lack of mentoring;
- 6) lack of management training;

- 7) lack of opportunity for career development;
- 8) little or no access to critical developmental assignments such as memberships on highly visible task forces and committees;
- 9) special or different standards for performance evaluation; and
- 10) little or no access to informal networks of communication. (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission 1995, p. 8)

Governmental or political barriers, according to the study, were identified as:

- 1) lack of vigorous, consistent monitoring of company employment practices,
- 2) weaknesses in the collection and disaggregating of employment related data, making it difficult to ascertain the status of groups at the managerial level; and
- 3) inadequate reporting and dissemination of information relevant to glass ceiling issues. (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission 1995, p. 8)

All of the barriers were identified as contributing to the disparities the number of women and minorities who reach top executive positions in the workplace, The research also indicated that where there were women and minorities in higher levels of leadership, their compensation was lower (Baxter et al., 2000). The presence of any type of ceiling which suggests or creates barriers to the upper level of managerial positions and disparities in salaries creates a gender gap in authority (Baxter et al., 2000).

Not all gender or racial inequalities can be defined as glass ceilings (Cotter, Hermsan, Ovadia & Vannerman, 2001). These authors define a glass ceiling as a specific type of gender or racial discrimination that can be distinguished from other types of gender or racial inequities. According to Cotter et al., these glass-ceiling barriers form a deep line of demarcation between those who prosper and those left behind. Their description of the glass

ceiling is one that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications, or achievements. Cotter et al. identified four criteria that identify glass-ceiling effects versus job place inequalities (2001).

The first criterion suggests that the true existence of a glass ceiling must validate job discrimination that is unexplained by a person's past qualifications or achievements. It reflects labor market discrimination, not just labor market inequality. Labor market inequalities most often derive from choices that people make to pursue non-market goals such as family, volunteer work or leisure. These are generally not considered as part of the glass ceiling (Cotter, et al., 2001). A glass ceiling inequality represents a gender or racial difference that is not explained by other job-relevant characteristics of the employee. They are simply passed over for promotions (Cotter, et al., 2001).

Criterion two indicates that a glass ceiling represents a gender or racial difference that is greater at higher levels than at lower levels of employment within the company (Cotter, et al. 2001). This does not rule out the glass ceiling from working-class, non-executive women or minorities, but it does require that job limits of women or minorities in the middle of a hierarchy are worse than job limits at lower levels. If the limits on a woman's advancement are constant throughout the hierarchy, then it is considered gender inequity, not a glass ceiling.

In criterion three a glass ceiling is present when there is discrimination in opportunity for advancement, promotions and salary increases. The determination of advancement in promotion and salary increases require longitudinal study of the promotion rate and earnings history between males and females within an organization. There must be an examination of the all of the contributing factors related to the lack of advancement at all levels within the

organization, not merely the proportions of each gender or race currently at those higher levels (Cotter et al., 2001).

Criterion four implies that a ceiling exists if some upward movement has been made in the past but later in one's career more severe discrimination sets in to block further progress (Cotter, et al., 2001). A glass ceiling clearly exists when an inequality represents a gender or racial inequality that increases over the course of a career.

Feminist research on school leadership has documented the persistent underrepresentation of women in the superintendency (Alston, 1999; Brunner, 1999; Grogan, 2000b; Shakeshaft; 1999). These studies point out the existence of a ceiling for women aspiring to the superintendent position, but according to Alston (1999), the difference in the ceiling depends on who is trying to transcend through it. The ceiling is described as glass if the women on the other side are White, but concrete if there is a woman of color on the other side (Alston, 1999; Banks, 1995; Jackson, 1999; Ortiz, 1999). The concrete ceiling is described as an opaque and non-transparent ceiling that blocks not only the view, but also the desire to ascend to whatever lies beyond the barrier (Alston, 1999). The challenges and barriers, real or perceived, are described as existing in the form of societal and cultural expectations, institutional and organizational expectations, and career pathway experiences (Alston, 1999).

#### *Societal and Cultural Female Role Definitions and Expectations*

African American females who work tirelessly to advance their careers and prepare themselves professionally in order to qualify for the highest-ranking office within the public school system may have their competence reviewed through the lens of past beliefs (Alston, 2005). If key decision makers responsible for the selection and appointment of school

superintendents are basing their decisions on erroneous notions about the competence of African Americans, potential candidates suffer (Alston, 1999). Black female candidates for the chief executive level position in the public schools must tread through deep waters of beliefs held about race, class, and gender (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Howard-Hamilton (2003), in a study of theoretical frameworks for African American women, reported that people hold stereotypical views of various occupations based on psychological and sociological factors. It is either what they have been programmed to believe through their environment and past experiences or it is society that formulates their opinions of who should or should not hold various positions within society (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Tannen (1994), examined the male dominated society and posited that women in positions of authority face a special challenge just because they are women. That challenge directly relates to society's expectations of how a person in authority should behave. The expectation of how persons in authority should behave is at odds with expectations of how a woman, especially a Black woman, should behave (Tannen, 1994). There are different society standards established for the male leader's behavior versus expected behavior of the female leader (Tannen, 1994). That challenge is even greater for the African American female. Gyant (1996), in a study of leadership styles of African American civil rights activists, concluded, "a ceiling exists for most African Americans...black skin is still equated by many with a lowering of standards, and nothing much will change that. I don't care how good Blacks become...it wouldn't help us" (p18).

Brunner (1997) posits that all barriers experienced by women in administration are a result either directly or indirectly of an androcentric society. Whitaker and Lane (1990) pointed out that the educational system follows the model of the traditional home, where men

manage and women nurture the learners. Even grade level organization within schools, reflects this gender segregation with females representing a large percentage of the teachers of primary and elementary grades and men having more presence at the secondary level. The gender structure in the traditional home and the educational setting is based on a dominant male whose authority is unquestioned according to Miller, Washington, and Fiene (2006), based on a study of the historical barriers that block access to the superintendency by women. Society has viewed the ideal leader as displaying forceful masculine qualities associated with the behavior of men in formal position of authority (Miller et al., 2006). Patterson (1994), in a study on how women shatter glass ceilings in school administration, indicated that White men tacitly define the dominate culture, thereby shaping the observations and judgments of society as a man's world. Society views tough, logical, hierarchical control as necessary in leading school districts (Miller et al., 2006). Dominant male administrative models, identified in the literature as: 1) traditional male lenses (Grogan, 1996); 2) subtle gender stereotypes (Gupton & Slick, 1996); and 3) socialization processes (Lougheed, 1998), create attitudinal and societal barriers for women (Grogan, 1996). Women in school administration inhabit a traditionally male profession that has evolved from the male managerial, command and control models (Miller, et al., 2006).

The societal limitations for the African American female are much broader because they include issues of race or racism (Ah Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998). From an historical perspective, the drudgery work was performed by the un-free, the African American (Mullings, 1997). According to Mullings one of every three passengers disembarking from the Atlantic crossing was an African woman, the one expected to do the drudgery work, one viewed as the second-class citizen. Prior to World War I, African American women were

barred from higher paid factory jobs and later from white collar positions in offices and stores that were open to White women. African American women were largely confined to domestic and laundry work (Mullings, 1997).

Gilligan's (1986) research provides insight into the behavioral leadership skills practiced by women. She found that women use relational type leadership skills more often than their male counterparts and that women are great human resource managers and builders. It is believed that the cultural training of women has encouraged them to use consensus management and caring processes to obtain group goals (Fox-Keller, 1998).

In their study of leadership styles of African American women leading urban schools, Murtadha and Larson (1999) found the leadership narratives of African American women strikingly rooted in anti-institutionalism and rational resistance. Woven through all the stories of the African American female study participants was a sense of community. African American women were viewed as nurturers, compassionate, caring more for individuals than policies. Women's ways of leading may be even more diverse than their cultural heritages (Murtadha & Larson, 1999). Women are described as using leadership styles derived from their own complex social and cultural histories (Ah Nee Benham & Cooper, 1998). Over the past 20 years, several fundamental questions have been posed regarding the ability of women to function in top leadership roles within organizations because of their leadership styles. These questions include: Can women be effective leaders? Do female and male leaders differ in their behavior and reaction in difficult situations? Why do so few women leaders reach the top? How can more women leaders reach the top? (Murtadha & Larson, 1999). Despite the array of studies indicating that women possess the behavioral skills and inner qualities that qualify them for effective

leadership, they remain under-represented in organizations' top leadership positions (Indvik, 2000). These organizations range from Fortune 500 companies to small local school districts.

Hemmons (1996) makes it clear that discrimination is an inevitable factor in the life of a Black woman, no matter her class, geographic region or family background, but simply because of her race. Discrimination, Hemmons pointed out, limits whatever chances and opportunities may be available to the African American female. She writes, "wherever she goes, there are ceilings and whether those ceilings are made of steel, wood or glass, they are there, inflexible, intractable, and impenetrable" (p. 7). Collins (1998) provided an analysis of how the intersections of race and class or race and gender shape group experiences across specific social contexts. Andrews and Simpson-Taylor (1995) referred to this phenomenon as the double whammy of race and gender. According to Brunner and Grogan (2007), African American female candidates for the superintendent's position in public schools, must tread though deep waters of beliefs held about gender and race.

#### *Organizational and Institutional Barriers*

Institutional and organizational structures create gates and barriers for women desiring top administrative roles. Tallerico (2000) examined the gatekeeper theory as a barrier to women and people of color ascending to the superintendent position. The purpose of her study was to examine the processes of searching for and selection of a superintendent, from a critical feminist perspective. These processes were viewed in terms of equity for females and people of color, to provide an understanding of factors related to gender and racial equity as well as those factors that inhibit promotion based on gender and race. The study advanced an understanding of the complex mix of the spoken and unspoken selection

criteria shared among consultants and members of boards of education and how they influence the process of selecting superintendents. Tallerico's work identifies institutional and structural practices that create gates and barriers for women and people of color. She reported that even though encouragement and support given to women appear to have increased, individual acts by search committees have neither altered their traditional practices nor enhanced the social responsibility essential to changing the male-dominated system to one that is inclusive of both genders.

Tallerico (2000) referred to the recruitment and selection process of school superintendents as head hunting. While head hunting refers to very primitive tribal practices of collecting the heads of enemies as trophies or for other reasons (Ehrlich, Fexner, Carruth & Hawkins, 1980), many school boards employ the services of outside executive searchers or headhunters to assist in the process of search and selection of the top leadership position in public schools.

Tallerico (2000) identifies two theories that relate to the study and are critical to organizational and institutional barriers. The two theories are: 1) gate keeping theory and 2) career mobility theory. Gate-keeping theory refers to systems of channels and gates that must be traversed and passed in route to higher posts. Applying Lewin's 1947 group theory, the superintendent selection would be viewed as a process by which applicants pass through a variety of channels, most of which are composed of multiple subdivisions or selections. Important points of the gate-keeping theory are that each section of channels reflects in or out gates or decision points in the process (Lewin, 1947). The gates are controlled either by a set of spoken or sometimes unspoken rules or by persons with differing degrees of power who are constrained or facilitated by multiple forces. The process of using gate keeping strategies

in the superintendent search and selection process forms a barrier for those who are different from the mental model identified by the gate keeper as ideal and may even be identified as not worthy to enter the gate (Tallerico, 2000).

Career mobility addresses career opportunities within the institution or organization (Jones & Montenegro, 1982). Jones and Montenegro identified four predictors significant to career growth and advancement. These predictors are: 1) age, 2) administrative aspirations, 3) clarity of expression, and 4) job experiences. These variable predictors are identified as having the greatest impact on ascending to higher levels within organizations or institutions. Career mobility can be most effected by those in charge of the organization.

In the 1970s and 1980s, issues related to barriers experienced by women aspiring to public school administrative careers were raised and investigated through studies (Chase & Bell, 1995). Questions were raised relative to factors contributing to women being disadvantaged and what, if any, corrective measures were in place to level the playing field and how effective were the measures in place (Ortiz, 1998). This line of inquiry continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including Dana and Bourisaw's (2006) examination of how discriminatory attitudes, stereotyping and gender bias limit women's access to educational administration.

Those responsible for the selection process of the superintendent have expressed concern that the educational preparation and experience pathway would be problematic for the female (Grogan, 1999). In 2000, more than half of masters and doctoral degree students in public school administration training programs were women (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). These data support that the absence of women in the superintendency may have less to do

with lack of training or availability of females in the administrator pipeline than with the search and selection process (Tallerico, 2000).

The lack of employment of women of color in the superintendent's positions may be directly linked to Boards of Education and their preconceived thinking about the leadership abilities of the African American female (Tallerico, 2000). The role of the local Board of Education is critical in the selection process of the district leader. For institutional leaders of any race or gender, the relationship with the Board of Education is complex and must be examined in the context of the public school system of governance (Tallerico, 2000). Local school boards control the local school district. The sum of their leadership responsibilities includes financial and legal oversight and the selection of the top executive officer, the superintendent. School Board members are elected by the citizens within the governing area according to state guidelines. They are elected to govern, not to manage or administer. The Board's authority emanates from state law, but its responsibility is to the community (Public School Laws of North Carolina, 2007).

Phelps and Taber (1994) in a discussion of leadership at the community college level established a foundation for discussion on institutional barriers:

The political reality of community colleges is that many trustees are elected and hypersensitive to their publics. There is always the fear that African American or minority presidents will not be accepted. (p. 24)

This fear acts as an institutional barrier between African American women and the superintendent position. According to Tallerico (2000), governing boards who hire superintendents have allowed negative stereotypes about African American women to influence their decision-making on qualified candidates. Rusher (1996) in a study of social

perceptions and Black women in higher education leadership positions reported that stereotypical attitudes present challenges for the Black female administrator because she has not been viewed as a key decision maker but more as a doer or hands-on worker. The African American woman is viewed through lens colored by gender and racial bias as well as societal and cultural expectations and stereotypes (Rusher, 1996). Ideas, instructions, and feedback from her may be received with hostility, in a patronizing manner, or sometimes blatantly ignored (Biggsby & Hutchinson, 2001). Rusher's study found that African American women college administrators were perceived as incompetent and unable to handle the demands of a top leadership position even though they had the necessary education and experience. The study concluded that the voice of the African American woman in the institution was often not taken seriously and input in decisions was met with resistance. These findings are consistent with the Biggsby and Hutchinson (2001) study on the impact of racial perceptions on the progress of African American women.

#### *Educational Preparation and Career Pathway Experiences*

Wharton (1986) wrote, "minorities in particular have been ardent believers in education as central to the uniquely American belief in bettering one's lot in life" (p.1). In 2008, 100% of African American female superintendents in North Carolina held doctoral degrees (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2008). Nationwide data indicate that women constitute more than 50% of the graduate students enrolled in educational administration programs (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Women are also achieving doctorate degrees in Educational Leadership at comparable rates to male candidates. However, only 10% of women in advanced degree programs are electing to earn the superintendency credential along with their educational specialist or doctoral degree

(Bjork et al., 2000). In North Carolina, two courses in addition to the required coursework for the masters degree or add-on certification are required to add superintendent certification. The courses are: 1) school finance, and 2) school facilities (North Carolina-Department of Public Instruction, 2003). The general assumption of Boards of Education is that women are not as experienced nor as interested in district wide fiscal management as men are and that they elect not to take the additional classes for certification (Tallerico, 2000). The 2007 American Association of School Administrators' study showed that boards place a high degree of emphasis on budget and financial decisions when employing a superintendent (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

These skills and experiences are gained primarily in the high school principalship or central office leadership position. According to the 2007 study on the state of the American superintendency, the majority of African American female school administrators were identified as elementary school principals with limited experiences at the secondary level (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Local Boards of Education identify the high school experience and central office experiences as critical and valuable for the superintendent position (Bjork et al., 2000). About half of the 297 women superintendents in the American Association of School Administrators' 2000 study had experience in the central office, and even fewer had responsibilities in personnel and finance. These job roles and responsibilities are considered to be direct pathways to the superintendent position (Bjork, et al., 2000). Fifty-five had been secondary school principals, who typically carry more responsibility in management and budget than do elementary school principals. Allen and Jacobson's study (1995) revealed that mentors, support systems and access to formal and informal networks were considered as

critical to the success in leadership roles by study participants as robust training and experience.

### *Networks, Support Systems, and Mentoring*

Shakeshaft (1989) in her book on *Women in Education Administration* wrote that there is no underestimating the importance of mentors and sponsors in the socialization and success of aspiring educational administrators. Allen and Jacobson (1995) points out that older administrators select prospective protégés for grooming as leaders and they usually seek to replicate themselves. As Shakeshaft concluded, African American women suffer doubly in the area of sponsorship because White men tend to promote other White men. White women and African American men who suffer with the same lack of sponsorships and mentors are unable to provide any level of support to the African American female. Because school administrators are predominantly White males, African American women are confronted with a double bind of race and gender bias as they seek mentors and sponsors from among the traditional network of superintendents. These already established networks are often referred to as the good old boy network (Doughty, 1980). Adkins (1981) found that when men elect to sponsor women in administration, they usually select women who are passive and non-threatening or those capable of appearing passive.

Jenkins (2005) points out that having a mentor allows access to information that may not otherwise be available to the protégé. Mentors will show one the ropes, tangible and intangible. They have insight, not only about the mechanics of an organization, but also about the nuances that may be difficult for a new person to interpret. In a study conducted in 2004 by Catalyst, a research and development organization that focuses primarily on women's issues, 56% of female and 52% of male executives reported that having an

influential mentor or sponsor was an important or very important success strategy.

Educational administrators frequently enter the educational administration profession through the encouragement of role models and mentors who later become major sponsors of the protégé (Gardiner, Enomoto & Grogan, (2000). According to Allen and Jacobson (1995), the lack of mentor relationships or sponsors often stands in the way of organizational promotions. Access to formal and informal networks hold promise for being integrated into the power structures and support networks of educational administration (Chase & Bell, 1996). Formal and informal networks provide access to information that is not readily available to all (Tallerico, 1999). Developing and maintaining connections within the network is as important as acquiring the skills to do the job. It is important to stay in touch with those who can put in a good word for you and who can get the information to you when needed (Tallerico, 1999).

### The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework within the overarching context of Black feminist theory that informs this study is drawn from the work of Alston (1999) and Jackson (1999). A conceptual framework provides the rationale for what data will be sought for the study and questions used for gathering the data.

Jackson (1999) detailed the biographies of 32 African American females serving as school superintendents during the 1993-1994 school year. From the study, four concepts emerged as critical to career success and institutional barrier breaking for the African American female. The concepts identified as success indicators were:

- 1) family support and early experience opportunities;
- 2) personal belief system and a positive/optimistic attitude;

- 3) realization that public opinion and approval are important elements of the job; and
- 4) advanced education preparation, robust experiences in the field and strong community connections.

Alston (1999) in a study of African American females aspiring to the superintendency, identified barriers that black women experience in route to the superintendency. These barriers were identified as:

- 1) the presence of the good old boy network;
- 2) absence of support systems or sponsorships and role models;
- 3) lack of awareness of political maneuvers;
- 4) societal attitudes that Blacks lack competency in leadership positions; and
- 5) no formal method for identifying Black aspirants to administrative positions.

The questions posted to participants in this study were grounded in these concepts of barriers and challenges.

### Summary

This literature review provided an historical perspective of all women, including African American women's role in education since the 18th century. This review also points out that there is limited available literature on women, but especially on African American women serving in administration roles within the school system. Barriers and challenges as well as career pathways and networks and support systems were also examined in the chapter. Chapter III will address the Methodology used to conduct this study.

### CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methods used to conduct this research study. The chapter is organized into three major sections. The first section explains the rationale for selecting the qualitative method to conduct the study and explanation of the Black feminist theory perspective that I used to guide the study and interpret the data collected. Included in this section are the overarching research questions and the reasons for using qualitative inquiry, specifically the phenomenological framework to direct the study. Particular issues stemming from this type of inquiry such as the role of the researcher, researcher bias, and methods used to validate the data are discussed. The second section of this chapter addresses the specific issues involved in the data collection process including the selection of the participants, interview sites, the selection of the interview as the data gathering method, and the methods used to record the data. The third section describes the data analysis procedures used to interpret the data acquired from the interviews. I describe the process used to examine the raw data for emerging themes, and the coding procedure utilized. In conclusion, I discuss the format used to present the data that will inform both researchers and public school practitioners how the data gathered in the study addresses the research questions.

#### *Research Questions*

The primary research goal was to examine the phenomenon of so few African American women in North Carolina ascending to the superintendency. This examination required identification of barriers and challenges perceived to be encountered by district level administrators. The aim of this study was to provide answers to the overarching question:

What are the perceptions of African American women about their barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools?

Secondary questions are:

1. Why there few African American women ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools?
2. What are the lived experiences of these women that effect who they are as leaders?

### *Qualitative Inquiry*

Myers (2000) describes qualitative methods as tools used in understanding and describing the world of human experiences. According to Myers, a major strength of the qualitative approach is the depth to which explorations are conducted and descriptions are written, usually resulting in sufficient details for the reader to grasp the full expanse of the situation. The ultimate aim of qualitative research is to offer a perspective of a situation and provide well-written research reports that reflect the researcher's ability to illustrate or describe the corresponding phenomenon (Myers, 2000). The primary goals of this study were:

1. To explore through the interview process the perceptions of African American women district leaders of barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency.
2. To learn more about the African American women who serve as district leaders and how their experiences have shaped who they are as leaders.

When examining this research study from a wide view, Myers' description of qualitative studies best satisfies the primary goals of this study.

Merriam (1998) defines qualitative research as an “umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (p. 5). This research incorporates the five characteristics described by Merriam as forming the basis of qualitative research. These are:

- 1) reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social world;
- 2) the research is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis;
- 3) fieldwork is usually conducted;
- 4) an inductive research strategy is primarily employed; and
- 5) the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive (p. 8).

Effective qualitative methods enable the researcher to probe situations in considerable depth and breadth, learn the participants’ personal feelings and views of activities, determine the social structure and context of the environment, and put all the observations into a holistic, all encompassing phenomenological picture (Siedman, 1991). In order to better understand the lived experiences of African American female district level administrators in North Carolina, who are not serving as superintendent, it was important to probe the situation in order to learn more about the personal feelings, views and activities of the participants, by first trying to identify patterns or themes of perceived barriers and challenges in ascending to the position.

This study:

1. Identified and categorized barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency as described by the participants;

2. Identified and categorized experiences that helped shape the leadership style of the participants as told in their personal and professional career pathways stories; and
3. Included the voices of women missing in action from the superintendent's role in North Carolina.

In order to better understand the lived experiences of African American female district level administrators in North Carolina, it was important that I understand the phenomenon of limited access to the superintendency by African American females in North Carolina public schools in the naturalistic setting in which it normally occurs. Creswell (2003) and Maxwell (2005) mention that the best way to answer research questions concerning a specific phenomenon, or a specific population within a naturalistic setting is to use the qualitative paradigm. The qualitative paradigm allows researchers the opportunity to gather rich data that emerge from within a specific context, allowing for the exploration in great depth by the use of purposeful sampling techniques in gaining access to a population that can best address the research questions.

According to Maxwell (1996), qualitative methods should be used for the following reasons:

1. to focus on specific situations or people and to place emphasis on words rather than numbers; and
2. to help understand the meaning participants make of their lived experiences, understanding the context of those experiences, and generating theories to understand better the experiences.

### *Black Feminist Thought*

Black feminism is described as a “critical social theory or as bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing groups of

people differently placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by injustice” (Collins, 1998, p. 276). As a critical social theory, Black feminism is concerned with fighting against economic, political, and social injustice for Black women and other oppressed groups. Black feminism examines issues affecting African-American women in the United States as a part of the global struggle for women’s emancipation (Collins, 1998). Black Feminism functions in two ways in this study. First, as a body of knowledge, it serves as a guide for describing, interpreting and analyzing data collected through the interviews and second, it allows for the examination of issues affecting African American women in leadership roles in North Carolina public schools. Collins points out that no one Black woman’s standpoint exists, instead Black women’s standpoints exist. Though the interviews, we hear these stories.

### *Phenomenology*

Phenomenology is the study of experiences and how they are experienced (Creswell, 1998). He writes, “A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about the concept or the phenomenon” (p. 51). According to Seidman (1991), not only does phenomenology study conscious experience as experienced, it also analyzes the structure of the experience, the types of experiences, intentional forms and meanings dynamics, and enabling conditions of perception, thought, imagination, emotion, volition and action. This study examined the early family experiences of the participants, early-identified role models, and influential relationships. The educational aspirations, preparation and training, mentor and sponsor relationships, and day-to-day work assignments and experiences of the participants were also examined. These experiences were analyzed for emerging themes of success indicators and perceived barriers

and challenges for African American women serving as district leaders, but not superintendents in North Carolina public schools.

### *Role of the Researcher*

Patton (2002) describes the role of the researcher as more than just being an objective observer. Qualitative research is interpretative research, with the inquirer typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants. According to Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000), this introduces a range of strategic, ethical, and personal issues into the research process. As a researcher, biases and preferences are brought to the study. In order to identify accurately the perceived barriers and challenges experienced by the participants, I had to identify and understand my own biases, and then use them to help me to understand better my role in this process.

Because of my interest in critical theory and social justice, my role as a researcher takes on a purposeful tone. In critical theory, it is incumbent upon the researcher to conduct research for actively addressing the inequalities that are present in society. In this study, the inequalities in the number of African American women serving in district leadership positions other than the superintendent in North Carolina schools were examined through the lived experiences of these women. Their stories provided information on how they perceive their experiences have affected and influenced their career choices and their lives.

### *Ethics*

According to Glesne (1999), “ethical considerations are inseparable from your everyday interactions with research participants and with your data” (p. 113). Trust is one of the most important considerations that I could extend the participants of my study. As mentioned by Patton (2002), in order to gain the trust of the individuals being interviewed,

one must guarantee several specific things. First, one must protect the interview participant from harm. Although my study did not expose the participants to physical harm, there could have been instances where specific questions about experiences may be emotionally painful. It was important to convey to the participants that they could request not to answer a question, that we take a break or to discontinue the interview and to withdraw from participating in the study at any time during the process without negative repercussions.

Trust was also established by assuring the participants that all of the conversations were strictly confidential and that all efforts would be made to make sure that none of the data could be linked to the participant. The participant needed to feel comfortable that her privacy would not be compromised. Each participant in the study was assigned an alias or pseudonym for the study. I am the only person with access to the list of real names of the study's participants. Employer names and identifying characteristics were changed or omitted to insure confidentiality.

Glesne (1999) says, "Researchers must consciously consider and protect the rights of the participant to privacy" (p. 122). A major objective was to insure the participant that any data collected from this study will only be used for the intended purpose of this particular study and that all tapes and transcripts were kept under lock and key and available only to the researcher, to be disposed of as specified in the research protocol, once the study is completed. Siedman (1991) describes informed consent as ethically and methodologically desirable. A personal phone call asking for her participation in this study followed by a thank you email was made to each participant. An informed consent form (Appendix A) that detailed the purpose and methods for the data collection process was sent to each participant after her consent to participate, at least a week prior to the scheduled interview.

As a qualitative researcher, my position as an interviewer required me to be an active participant in the interview process. Knowing this, I had to be very aware of the biases that I brought to the study. As a social activist, one who is concerned with fairness, equal opportunity and access and justice for all, it was important that I remain silent at times during the interview process and not let my personal beliefs confuse what others had to say. During the interviews I could not allow the role of activist take the primary role in the interview process; I always assumed the posture of investigator. It was important that I established a trusting and supportive rapport with all participants, but I had to remain focused on the primary objective of research. As a proponent of social justice, I believe that all people have the same right to the basic human needs and their fair share of society's benefits. I also believe that systems, whether governmental or educational, must insure that there is a level of equality in the social, political and economic policies of their institutions.

I also believe that dialogue on race and gender, and the differences in culture and racism need to be a permanent part of our conversations in our institutions of learning. These conversations should not just be limited to how racial and gender discrimination applies to the students that are served in our schools, but also as it applies to the employees within the schools, including the leadership. Knowing my biases before starting the study helped me to remain objective in the data collection process.

#### *Data Sources*

In order to examine the essence of the phenomenon of perceived barriers and challenges, interviews were conducted with African American district leaders across North Carolina who are not serving as superintendents. Creswell (2003) describes the interview process as being an excellent tool in allowing the researcher to understand the phenomenon

or other experiences without directly observing the phenomenon. According to Tierney and Dilley (2002) interviewing, which is critical to many forms of qualitative educational research, is used to record oral histories, life histories, ethnographies and case studies.

Seidman (1998) writes:

Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experiences affects the way they carry out that experience...Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action (p. 4).

Meaning as described by Dilley (2004), is not just facts, but the understandings one has that are specific to the individual (what was said) yet transcendent of the specific (what is the relation between what was said, how it was said, what the listener was attempting to ask or hear, what the speaker was attempting to convey or say). A continuing question for the interviewer is what has been learned from what has been told (Seidman, 1998). There are three described components to understanding what has been told according to Rubin and Rubin (1995, 70-71):

1. Understanding is achieved by encouraging people to describe their worlds in their own terms;
2. Interviewing involves a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee that imposes obligations on both sides; and
3. The philosophy of the researcher helps define what is interesting and what is ethical and provide standards to judge the quality of the research, the humanity of the interviewing relationship and the completeness and accuracy of the write-up.

Interviews provided documentation of experiences as well as perceptions, both conscious and unconscious, which have shaped the professional and personal lives of the participants. In addition, interviews provided understanding to the question of why there are few African American women serving as superintendents in North Carolina as the analysis of the data provides meaning to what has been told.

Face to face interviews were conducted in eight of the ten interviews. Telephone interviews were conducted with two participants due to scheduling conflicts. Groves (1989), suggests that telephone interviewing achieves greater cost efficiency and fast results in obtaining a completed interview in a short amount of time. As researcher, I was sensitive to the needs of the participants and aimed to accommodate their schedules in any way necessary in order to maximize the 90-minute period developed for each interview.

Another rationale for the use of the qualitative interviewing method utilized in this study was the value of oral history data. Each participant is a meaning maker (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) through spoken memories and experiences and through recorded interviews (Ritchie, 1995). Anderson and Jack (1991) explain that interviews offer narrators an opportunity to tell a story and provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about participants' experiences of themselves in their worlds. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) report the need for research that allows study participants to speak in their own voices, producing new accounts of people's lives. Such research, according to Belenky et al. (1986) results in the greater understanding of individual's perspectives and social situations. With more than 225 years of combined district work experience, the participants of this study provided rich descriptions of lived experiences and perceptions of challenges and barriers in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools. These experiences

provided the researcher with data from which to draw larger conclusions. Appalachian State University Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was received in October 2008 and a requested extension was approved in October 2009 (Appendix D).

### *Data Collection*

Data for this study were collected through face to face and/or telephone interviews with ten African American women employed in North Carolina public schools as district leaders (directors, assistant or associate superintendent). Individual interviews of approximately 90 minutes duration were conducted using open-ended interview questions and follow-up probes developed from the conceptual framework of Jackson (1999) and Alston (1999) as they both examined the phenomena of few African American female superintendents (Appendix B ).

The conceptual framework for the biographical questions developed for interviews conducted during this study were based on Jackson's (1999) four concepts that emerged as critical to career success:

1. Family support and early experience opportunities;
  2. Personal belief system and a positive/optimistic attitude;
  3. Realization that public opinion and approval are important elements of the job;
- and
4. Advanced education preparation, robust experience in the field and strong community relations.

Alston's (1999) framework identifying barriers and the absence of support systems that impact the African American woman's experience in route to the superintendency were used to structure questions relative to barriers and challenges. Alston identified these barriers

as:

1. presence of the “good old boy network”;
2. absence of support systems or sponsorships as role models;
3. lack of awareness of political maneuvers;
4. societal attitudes that Blacks lack competency in leadership positions; and
5. no formal method for identifying Black aspirants to administrative positions.

While the questions served as the basis for all interviews, various forms of follow-up questions were asked, based on the responses of the participant. A modified version of Seidman’s (1991) model of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing was used in this study. The model suggests using the interview to establish the context of the participant’s experiences, reconstruct details of the experiences, and encourage the participants to reflect on the meaning of the experiences. Consistent with Glesne’s (1999) assertion that the questions must fit the topic, interview questions were developed that focused on the early influences and role models of the participants, education background and training opportunities, actual work experiences in public education, identified supporters, mentors and sponsors, and community, political and cultural experiences. Final interview questions permitted each participant an opportunity to reflect on making sense of their experiences in their roles as district leaders and the fact that there are few African American women superintendents in North Carolina.

Eight interviews were conducted face to face and two, due to scheduling conflicts, were conducted by telephone. Four of the eight face-to-face interviews were conducted in the offices of the participants; three were conducted in the homes of the participants and one interview was conducted in a restaurant. At each interview, I explained the purpose of the

study and provided them with another copy of the Informed Consent Form. Each participant provided me with a copy of her resume.

All interviews were digitally tape recorded, with the participants' permission, including the telephone interviews, to insure the accuracy of the data. I personally transcribed each recording, by first writing the transcription while listening to the tape, then typing each transcription from my hand-written notes. I listened to the tapes a third time while reading the typed transcriptions for accuracy. Transcriptions were made available to participants to review for accuracy prior to conducting the analysis. No requests were made by the participants to review the data.

#### *Participant Selection*

Creswell (1998) suggests the use of a particular sampling technique known as purposeful sampling as a major tool in qualitative inquiry. This technique utilizes specific criteria such as pre-existing condition, experience with certain phenomenon, or membership in a specific organization to select individuals for a study. In qualitative inquiry, a phenomenological study to understand a specific phenomenon, a researcher must purposefully seek out persons that have experienced the phenomenon in order to obtain more information about the phenomenon to be studied. In this study, I employed this technique by selecting African American women who met all of the required educational and work experience criteria for the superintendent's position in North Carolina and who were serving in high profile, top leadership positions throughout school districts in North Carolina.

Table 1  
*Profile of the Study Participants*

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Job Title	Education
Danielle	54	S	Assistant Supt.	Ed D
Jasmine	52	M	Personnel Director	Ed D
Victoria	47	S	Director/Curriculum	Enrolled Ed D Program
Brenda	42	M	Director/ New Teacher Support	Enrolled Ed D Program
Lisa	57	M	Assistant Supt.	Enrolled Ed D Program
Shayla	58	D	Associate Supt.	Ed D
Monique	53	M	Assistant Supt.	Ed D
Maria	36	M	Assistant Supt.	Ed D
Yvette	38	S	Director/Staff Development	Ed D
Rhonda	57	M	Assistant Supt.	Ed D

Patton (1990) writes, “qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed data about a much smaller number of people and cases” (p. 227). According to Patton “in-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information rich” (p. 244). Limiting the study to ten purposefully selected participants, allowed me enough time to establish relationships with the participants as appropriate.

The list of participants was identified through the North Carolina Personnel Administrators’ Association and through the recommendation of others who were either participants in the study or those who were aware of the study. Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- Must currently serve as a district level administrator (director, assistant or associate superintendent) in a North Carolina public school system;

- Must hold a doctorate degree or be enrolled in a doctoral program; and
- Must have no experiences as a superintendent in the state of North Carolina.

### *Data Coding*

Following the recommendations of Miles and Huberman, (1994) I developed a code key (Appendix C) that assisted in identifying major themes that emerged from the data. Initial emerging themes were color-coded and assigned a descriptive wording code. All of the data belonging to each category or theme were reviewed for a preliminary analysis. All of the qualitative data collected for this analysis involved coding data into themes, then sub-themes, to form conclusions (Creswell, 2003). All of the notes including field notes, memos, resumes, and interview transcriptions were coded. The coding process was carried out by reading each of the documents and attributing a code to sentences, paragraphs or sections. These codes formed the basis for identifying a theme or idea with which each part of the data was associated.

### *Data Analysis*

Patton (2002) reports that analysis actually occurs well before the data collection process is completed. He mentions that the act of collecting data will generate ideas, themes, and patterns that emerged in the process of collecting the interviews. Even the formation of research questions is an attempt to frame a study in order to gather specific types of data. In order to consider these findings, I conducted a thorough examination of my field notes, memos, and informal summaries written during the interview process. This process helped me to begin to identify and develop preliminary ideas and themes before attempting to analyze the transcription data as well as it helped me to identify the major points that I could use to develop a coding system.

“Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned” (Glesne, 1999, p. 130). In keeping with the tradition of oral history, the interview data collected for this study was transcribed verbatim. Studies of women conducted in the past offered an example of this type of structure. Research by Ward and Westbrook (2000) served as an example of the use of verbatim data. They employed oral history interviews to study the experience of 10 female college students.

### *Trustworthiness*

When conducting qualitative inquiry it is important to make sure that the data collected and the conclusions induced from the data have a strong sense of credibility and trustworthiness. Maxwell (2005) discusses the importance of credibility when conducting a scholarly study. He mentions that the term validity is most often associated with the quantitative paradigm, and is not the best term to associate with qualitative study. Because data generated in the qualitative paradigm involves the lived experiences of individuals, Maxwell prefers to use the term verification, as it implies that the methods used in qualitative studies can have the necessary rigor, while still preserving the individual’s valid experiences. The methods I used for verification were cross-referencing and participant de-briefing. In order to keep my biases from affecting the findings of the study, I listened to the recordings of all interviews three times and completed two transcriptions for accuracy and familiarity prior to coding and analyzing the data. I cross-referenced the themes that emerged from the data with the themes that were examined in the literature and compared the themes between the transcripts of the different participants interviewed in the study. I also examined the similarities or differences that may be related to age or geographical location of the participants as a cross reference between the participants.

I was interested in the under representation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina schools and investigated possible reasons for this phenomenon. I utilized a qualitative review study approach to explore this issue. In this chapter, I defined the under representation of African American women, explained the research approach, the theoretical framework, participant selection, research settings, data collection plan, ethical considerations, data analysis plan and trustworthiness. Chapter IV will present the results of the study and chapter V will present analysis, implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research drawn from the findings.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This study was conducted to examine the absence of significant or even proportional numbers of African American women serving as superintendents in North Carolina's public schools systems. Alston (1999) asked two questions, 1) where are the Black female superintendents and 2) why are they missing in action from the superintendency? These two questions are still relevant today in North Carolina as statistical data reveals that during the 2008-2009 school year, 1.73% or two of the 115 superintendents were identified as African American females (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009). Examining this phenomenon included identifying the perceptions of African American women about their barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools and ways they cope with the identified barriers and challenges within the workplace. The study was designed to also identify the formal training, preparation and in the field experiences these women have been involved in to prepare them for the superintendent position.

### *Research Questions*

The primary research question was: What are the perceptions of African American women about their barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools.

The secondary research questions were:

- 1) Why are so few African American women ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools?

- 2) What are the lived experiences of these women that effect who they are as leaders?

Data analysis focused on emergent themes that evolved from the study participants' interviews and resumes. Results of the analysis of the data are presented in three sections. The first section contains demographic and descriptive information related to early life experiences, family and community influences, role models and formal educational training, including career opportunities of the participants in this study. The description of the participants in this study is based on information collected for the interview, the participants' resumes, and observation field notes recorded during the interview session. The second section describes the interview process and presents the participants' responses to the interview questions with a focus on their perceptions of challenges and barriers in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina and the manner in which they cope with their perceived barriers and challenges within the work environment. The last section discusses the major themes that emerged during the data analysis. In keeping with qualitative research protocol (Patton, 2002), pseudonyms are used for the names of participants in order to maintain anonymity.

### *Participants*

The participants of the study were ten African American women who were currently serving as district level administrators. Total number of years in education ranges from 15 to 32 years. Seven of the participants have earned doctoral degrees and are certified by North Carolina Department of Instruction at the superintendent's level. Three of the participants are currently enrolled in doctoral programs. Each of the three has earned the Educational Specialist degree in School administration and holds superintendent's certification in the

state of North Carolina. Six of the participants are assistant or associate superintendents and four are program directors. Four are employed in school districts with an enrollment of less than 5000 students. Four are from large school districts with student enrollments from 1,485 to 51,822 students, and two are employed in very large school districts with more than 30,000 students. Five of the participants are married, two are divorced, and three are single. Years of experience in education totaled 225 years combined for the participants.

Nine of the participants when contacted agreed immediately to participate in the study. One participant, after hearing about the study, contacted me and volunteered to participate. Each participant felt she had a story that needed to be told. Each participant expressed a personal desire that something would evolve from such a study that would change the way African America women are treated in North Carolina public schools.

Table 2 provides a profile of the participants' demographic information including district size, based on student enrollment and years of experience, in relation to their job assignment and educational status.

Table 2

*Participants' Profile of District Size and Work Experience*

Alias	Job Title	Educational Status	Size of School District (# students)	Years Experience
Danielle	Assistant Supt	Ed D	5,297	32
Jasmine	Personnel Director	Ed D	2,528	27
Victoria	Director/Curriculum	Enrolled Ed D Program	19,005	21
Brenda	Director/ New Teacher Support	Enrolled Ed D Program	34,204	19
Lisa	Assistant Sup	Enrolled Ed D Program	3,030	33
Shayla	Associate Supt	Ed D	8,517	33
Monique	Assistant Supt	Ed D	1,485	29
Maria	Assistant Supt	Ed D	51,822	15
Yvette	Director/Staff Development	Ed D	31,180	16
Rhonda	Assistant Supt	Ed D	31,769	30

*Danielle*

Danielle contacted me about the study after hearing about it from one of the other participants in the study. Fifty-four years old and divorced, she refers to herself as a single, independent African American female. She comments that her short-lived marriage, less than a year, when she was 28 years old, hardly qualifies as a marriage. She never re-married. Danielle is employed in a large school district in eastern North Carolina.

Danielle holds a bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in school administration from large North Carolina universities. She earned a doctorate degree in 2006 from a university in another state. She has been employed as a middle school and high school teacher, a high school assistant principal, and a high school principal. She has been

employed for three years as the coordinator of secondary curriculum and now as the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction at the district level.

Danielle is the middle child of three children in the family and the only college graduate. She was born to a single mother and was reared by her grandmother, who helped her mother with her and her sisters, until her mother married when Danielle was 11 years old. One sister is six years older than she is and her other sister is 12 years younger. She was born and reared in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. She returned home after completing college and began teaching in the district she grew up in as a middle school teacher. After four years at the middle school, and while enrolled in a master's program in school administration, she moved to the high school as a teacher. She left the state after completing graduate studies in school administration to take a job as assistant principal at a high school after she was unsuccessful at finding a high school assistant principalship in North Carolina.

I applied and no one offered. I tried all over North Carolina to get a high school [assistant principal] position but I could not get an appointment. It seemed that every time I would lose out to a man, a white man, with coaching experience. I guess I did not read the small print. . . I never read in any of the job descriptions that white male with coaching experience was a requirement. So the first opportunity I had to get a high school assistant principalship, I jumped on it, even though it was in another state. I was a lot younger, had nothing holding me back so I packed up and moved.

Danielle served as a high school assistant principal for four years before being promoted to principal of a very large high school (2000 students). She remained there as high school principal for five years. While there, she completed her doctoral degree. In

2007, she accepted a position as director of secondary curriculum at the central office level where she is currently employed as assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

*Jasmine*

Fifty-two year old Jasmine has been married to her college sweetheart for 26 years and has four adult children. Two of her children are her biological children and two she and her husband adopted after they lost both parents. Jasmine's youngest child is a freshman at a nearby Historically Black College or University (HBCU) and her only daughter is a teacher in another North Carolina school district. One son is still trying to find himself and is living and working close to home, and she hopes that he will soon decide to return and complete college. Her older son is a computer programmer, married with two children and is living in another state. She describes her two grandchildren as the pride and joy of her life.

Jasmine has earned a bachelor's degree in public health and three master's degrees. Her first master's degree is in school counseling, the second is in agency counseling, and her third is in school administration. In 2006, she earned a doctorate degree in educational leadership. Her career pathway has included public health educator, school health educator, school counselor, high school assistant principal, elementary principal, and presently she is the director of personnel for her school district.

Born in the southeastern region of the state, Jasmine is the sixth of seven children in the family. Her mother cleaned houses for a living and her father was a chef. After graduating from college, she moved to the northeastern region of North Carolina to work as a public health educator for a county health department. After one year she moved to the Piedmont region of the state, married, took a job in the school system, got hooked on helping others and has been in the region and in public education every since.

*Victoria*

Forty-seven year old Victoria is the oldest of three children. She is single with no children. Victoria was born in the western region of North Carolina to working class parents. Both of her parents are living and still reside in the same neighborhood, in the same house where Victoria grew up. Her parents have been married for 51 years. Victoria expresses how proud she is of her parents for enduring the stresses and trials of raising a family and keeping their marriage intact. One of her siblings is also in education and the other lives and works very close to her parents in their hometown.

After graduating at the top of her class from a moderate size high school (131 graduating seniors in her class), she attended a large university in North Carolina and majored in secondary education. After graduating from college, she returned home, and lived with her parents while teaching school within the community. After almost ten years in the classroom, she decided to return to college to complete a master's degree and certification in school administration. She accepted a position as an elementary assistant principal within her school district where she remained for five years before becoming an elementary school principal. After spending five years as an elementary principal, she is now employed as director of curriculum in her school district. In 2007, she earned her doctoral degree in Educational Leadership.

*Brenda*

Brenda is 42 years old and works in the community in which she grew up. The building that now houses her office is the same building where she attended elementary school. She is the third child in a family of four children. She describes her parents as wonderful parents and role models for her and her siblings. Her older sister is in education

and works in the same district. Her older brother has a degree in English, and is currently a minister in North Carolina and her younger sister, an Ivy League college graduate, is an attorney. Her mother graduated from college the same year that her older sister. Her mother worked until she retired as a pre-K teacher in the same school system where Brenda is employed.

After graduating from college with a degree in elementary education, Brenda could not find a job at home so she had no choice but to take a job in another region of North Carolina as an elementary teacher. After working away from home for four years, she was offered a position in her home district and was happy to move back and be afforded an opportunity to work in the district where she and her siblings were educated and where her mother was employed. A year later, she was married and she and her husband purchased a home in the county close to her hometown. Her husband, a college graduate, is currently employed in law enforcement. She has two sons. The older is a freshman in high school and the younger is in seventh grade in middle school. Until this year, her sons were enrolled in the school district in which she is employed. Everyday, her sons would make the 35 minute one way commute to work and back with their mother. Until this year, they had always been involved in extra-curricular activities in the district in which they attended school, rather than the district where they lived. Even though her sons are now attending school in their home district and her husband is employed in that county, according to Brenda, they do everything else in her home county. Other than school activities for her sons and work for her husband, there is very little that her family does in the county where they reside. She likes it that way because she gets to be with family and childhood friends and feel comfortable in that setting. For the past seven years, Brenda has been director of the new teacher support program in her

district. She is currently enrolled in a doctoral program in Educational Leadership. She holds a masters degree in school administration.

*Lisa*

Lisa is the 57-year-old mother of two adult sons. One son is employed and doing well and the second son was incarcerated and scheduled for release a few months following this interview. The incarcerated son has a college education and is a very bright young man but according to Lisa, he was *just plain stupid*. She has been married for 34 years and her husband is currently self-employed, doing whatever he can due to health issues. At the time of the interview, he was primarily assisting her sister who was taking care of their father who has Alzheimer's.

The oldest of five children, Lisa is also employed in the same district in which she grew up and was educated. She has two sisters and two brothers. One brother is also in school administration, serving as a superintendent in another state; a second brother is incarcerated. One of her sisters works in a textile mill, even though she has a college degree that she has not used for employment purposes. Her younger sister has a degree in mechanical engineering and owns her own business franchise in another state. Her 79 year old father is still alive but suffers with Alzheimer's. Lisa describes her mother who died 25 years ago as the *driving force behind her family...she was our rock*.

Lisa has a bachelor's degree in business education, a master's degree in business education, a second master's degree in School Administration along with an educational specialist degree in School Administration with superintendent certification from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. She is currently enrolled in a doctoral program in

Educational Leadership. Lisa worked as a high school business teacher, assistant principal and is now the assistant superintendent for human resources in her school district.

*Shayla*

Fifty-eight year old Shayla is the youngest of four children. She has an older sister and two older brothers. Her father died in 2005 and her 81 year old mother is doing well and still living independently just a few miles away. Shayla commented that she had been divorced longer than she was married. She has one adult son, who is employed and lives in another state. The only time Shayla has ever been away from home for any extended period was when she attended undergraduate school. She graduated from college in three years, returned home to teach, and has been there for the past 32 years.

After teaching for eight years at the high school level, she moved to the central office as a general supervisor. There her primary responsibilities were supervising media coordinators and counselors, working some with curriculum, testing, and personnel, and anything else that the superintendent might assign. After serving in this role for three years, Shayla was named part-time assistant principal and part-time district coordinator. She found that it was extremely difficult to be effective in this assignment because she was expected to be all things for a lot of people. After learning that there were no plans to make either of the positions full time due to budget constraints, Shayla applied for and was offered a position with the state Department of Public Instruction as a regional consultant. She worked primarily as a trainer to school districts within her region. After 15 months in this position, the state due to budget woes downsized regional offices across the state and fearing that her position would be cut, she returned to her school district as an instructional development advisor primarily responsible for helping new teachers. After a couple of years in that

position, she became an elementary school principal. Shayla remained in that position for five years before being promoted to assistant and then associate superintendent within the district. She is planning to retire soon.

Shayla has a bachelor's in secondary English education, an master's in school administration, an education specialist degree in school administration with superintendent certification and a doctoral degree in educational leadership.

### *Monique*

Fifty-two year old Monique is one of eight children and the only girl. She is the fifth born child. She and a brother are the college graduates in her immediate family. Her mother raised these eight children as a single parent. Monique was born and reared in the southeastern region of North Carolina in a very protective environment. When she first left for college, she had to live with an aunt who happened to live in the same city as the college she attended, because her mother was afraid for her to go off by herself and had concerns with her living on campus.

At the end of her senior year, Monique received a call from the superintendent of schools in her hometown, offering her a position in the district. She really did not want to return home to work and told the superintendent that she would have to think about the offer. When she shared with her mother the conversation she had with the superintendent, her mother immediately told her, there was nothing to consider, she was coming home and she did and has been employed in that same district now for 29 years.

Monique's first marriage ended in divorce, and she has one adult daughter and one adult stepson from that marriage. She is now remarried and has five adult stepchildren and thirteen step-grandchildren. Her biological daughter is now enrolled in college.

Monique earned a bachelor's degree in speech pathology, a master's degree in school administration and a doctorate in educational leadership. She has been employed as a speech and language pathologist, an elementary school assistant principal, exceptional children's program director and currently serves as assistant superintendent for exceptional children's services and human resources within her school district.

### *Maria*

Maria is from a large family, and she is the only child born to her mother and the older of two children born to her father. She has a younger half-brother who is majoring in education. Maria was born in a small, predominately White community in a rural area within the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Her mother has seven siblings and her father has four siblings. Maria is the oldest of ten grandchildren on her mother's side and the oldest of nine grandchildren on her father's side of the family. To her knowledge, only one other person in her family has completed college. She was born to teenage parents. Her mother was almost 19 and her father was 18 when she was born. She was primarily reared by her mother's parents. Maria feels that her parent's marriage did not last because they were too young when they married. Her mother remarried when Maria was in junior high school, and she lived with her mother and stepfather until her mother changed employment. Her mother was now working with law enforcement, so Maria spent quite a bit of time with her grandparents, whom she describes as having a lot of influence on her, because of her mother's work schedule. Both grandparents are now deceased, and her parents, both in their mid-fifties, are retired.

Maria has earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education, a master's degree in school administration, and a doctoral degree in educational leadership. She has worked as a

classroom teacher, an academically gifted itinerate teacher, an elementary school assistant principal, an elementary school principal, all within a 20 mile radius of where she was born and reared. Currently Maria is employed as assistant superintendent in a school district located in the central Piedmont region of North Carolina, which is more than 60 miles from her hometown. Maria is 36 years old and single with no children.

*Yvette*

Yvette is the most mobile of the participants that I interviewed. She was born in another eastern state and her family moved to North Carolina at a very early age, to her mother's hometown. She is one of three children and the only girl. Her father has 23 siblings, including seven sisters, who are all teachers. Her mother worked as a teacher's assistant until her retirement a few years ago. Most of her father's brothers were truck drivers as is her father. All of her life, Yvette wanted to be just like her aunts and teach school.

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in secondary history, Yvette remained in her college town to pursue a master's degree. After completing her master's degree in history, she returned home to teach at a local high school. After teaching for four years, she had the opportunity to return to school as a participant in a Principals Fellows program. She moved back to the university community to continue her education, and then returned home to complete her internship year in the same high school where she had been a teacher. After completing that year, she was offered an assistant principal position and decided to accept it. She accepted the position mainly because the principal at that time was female and she felt she could learn so much from her. She remained in the assistant principal's position for two years and was promoted to principal of a middle school within the same district. After

serving as principal for two years, she was promoted to a central office program coordinator's position, primarily responsible for staff development and new teacher development. When Yvette decided it was time to work on her doctorate, she tried at first to maintain her position with the school district and commute as needed to campus. She soon grew weary of so much travel and decided to relocate to the area where the university was located. Not long after she re-located she secured a central office position within that school district and for the past four years has served as senior director for staff development in a very large school district. Yvette earned a doctoral degree in educational leadership in 2009. She is 39 years old and single.

#### *Rhonda*

Fifty-seven year old Rhonda is married and the mother of one adult son. Her son is divorced, has full custody of his seven-year-old daughter and they both live with Rhonda and her husband. Rhonda describes her granddaughter as the *apple of her eye*. Rhonda's husband of 34 years is employed as director of an area recreational facility. Rhonda and her husband are life long residents of the city in which they both reside and work. She is an only child and was reared by her mother after her dad died before her fifth birthday.

After graduating from college, Rhonda moved back home to live with her mother and accepted a teaching job in a neighboring county teaching junior high English because the local pay was very good. She drove the 30 minute, depending on traffic, one-way commute everyday for 17 years. After earning a masters in middle grades language arts and becoming certified in academically gifted education, she accepted a job as coordinator of the academically gifted program in her hometown and remains employed there. She earned an educational specialist degree in curriculum and instruction and a doctoral degree in

educational leadership. Rhonda has served as a middle school teacher, coordinator of the academically gifted program, elementary assistant principal, elementary principal and assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

The following section describes the interview experience with each participant. I present the important or notable aspects of each participant, the interview setting and the interview process itself as culled from my field notes.

### Research Participants' Interviews

#### *Danielle*

Danielle was the first interview scheduled and was very eager to be a part of the study. Danielle had heard about the study from a friend of hers who was also participating in the study, so she contacted me to express an interest in participating. We scheduled her interview to take place two days following our initial conversation about the study. Following the initial phone conversation, I followed up with a confirmation email relative to the date and time of the scheduled interview session. It was mutually agreed on that I would travel to her office to conduct the interview.

Being very excited about my first interview for the study, I checked and rechecked my digital recorder, purchased extra batteries just in case the others failed to work and carefully packed my bag with pens, notepads, and a file to include the Informed Consent agreement, the interview protocol, and a copy of the resume provided to me by the participant.

On the day of the interview, I checked my email and voice messages to make sure that I had not received a last minute cancellation from Danielle. There were no messages and with accurate googled driving directions I arrived at the destination on schedule. I was

greeted very professionally by the receptionist who was seated behind a large glass window. After announcing that I had a 2:00 p.m. appointment with Dr. Danielle, the receptionist immediately called to announce my arrival. Within seconds, Dr. Danielle arrived in the lobby. I had never met her before, so we spend the first few minutes introducing ourselves. After our formal introductions, she escorted me to her office. After putting down my bag at the small round conference table identified as the interview area and hanging up my coat, Dr. Danielle directed me to the ladies' room before starting the interview.

Back in her office, Danielle called the receptionist desk and informed her that she would be in an interview session for the next hour or more and to hold all of her calls until we finished the interview. As Danielle spoke with the receptionist, I set up the interview space, by placing the recorder in front of me, along with the file that included the Informed Consent form that needed to be signed, notepads and pens. Danielle's office was very small and conducive for the interview. Her desk contained a display of several family pictures. There were two chairs placed at the interview table and a large black leather chair behind her desk. I noticed, like my own office, there were no windows. Other than a display of diplomas and awards on the wall, the office was modestly decorated. Once settled in, we exchanged small talk about the drive to her district, the changing weather and the dissertation journey before starting the interview. I began with an overview of the study and an explanation of the Informed Consent Form. Several times during my explanation of the study, Danielle commented that she was very excited about this study and could not wait to read it. She commented that she was glad that she was not going to be identified in the study by name, because she had a lot to share but did not want to offend anyone with her

comments. After securing Danielle's signature on the consent form, I checked to see if she had questions. She had none, so I turned on the tape recorder and started the questioning.

### *Jasmine*

With my first interview behind me, I was feeling relieved at how well it had gone and how quickly Danielle and I had connected. As I prepared for the next interview, my hopes were that this one would be as relaxed and comfortable. Jasmine and I are colleagues and we know each other, so that added to my fear of would she feel comfortable opening and sharing her life and professional experiences with me. Jasmine's name was on the list provided by the Personnel Administrators of North Carolina. I emailed Jasmine after selecting her from the list to ask her to participate in the study because she was within reasonable driving distance from me. Like everyone that I contacted about participating in this study, she was excited about the title. After an explanation of the study and sharing the research questions, Jasmine wanted to be interviewed immediately. I emailed to her the Informed Consent Form and asked that she review it, sign it, and return it to me via email or fax within the next couple of days. I also asked for a copy of her most recent resume. She agreed to fax both documents to me within a day or so.

Six days later I headed east to the interview. Armed with my googled directions and the directions provided to me by the transportation director in Jasmine's school district, I thought I would be able to locate the interview site with little to no problem. As I traveled through periods of very heavy rain and limited visibility, my thoughts quickly turned to the dissertation process. I began to think about the information that I would collect and what would it all mean. I wondered if the information gathered would be quality information. I

wondered if anybody other than my study participants, my committee and me, even cared about the results of this study.

Arriving in the city of my destination 15 minutes prior to the scheduled interview, I referenced the directions and searched for the road signs and landmarks provided by the transportation director. I could not find any of the landmarks he provided nor could I find the road signs indicated on the directions I googled. When I noticed that I had passed the same establishment for the second time, I realized that I had missed a turn or something. I reached for my phone and realized that I had left Jasmine's office number on my desk. Straight ahead, I noticed a wholesale bakery store, so I pulled into the parking lot to retrieve my bag. I decided to stop in the store to get directions. The woman sitting behind the counter looked up immediately and asked if she could be of assistance to me. I told her I was looking for the county school's central office and needed directions. There was a woman shelving bread who I had not seen when I first entered the store, and she moved toward the counter and asked, *is that the school office over there near the water tank?* I remembered from the directions provided by the transportation director that there was a large water tank across the street. I affirmed that the building near the water tank was the building that I was trying to find. It was good to know that I was only three minutes away, if I went the back way rather than back through town. The woman who had been shelving bread, walked out of the front door with me to point me in the right direction, providing me with landmarks as directions rather than street names or directional instructions. She invited me to come back if I could not find the building and she would help me get there.

I arrived at the Central office in less than five minutes. I went directly to the receptionist stationed at a desk located in the center of the lobby. I announced that I had an

appointment with Dr. Jasmine and that I was about five minutes late, she smiled and informed me that Dr. Jasmine was getting worried about me. She called Dr. Jasmine and almost instantly, she appeared. We exchanged hugs and greetings and I had to explain my site seeing adventure. We both acknowledged that we had shared work numbers but not cell phone numbers.

Dr. Jasmine led the way to her office, stopping at several doors along the way to introduce me to her colleagues. Once in her office, she immediately programmed her phone to unavailable so that it would go immediately to voice mail during the interview. Dr. Jasmine's office was small with a desk and two side chairs, file cabinets and bookshelves. Jasmine sat across from me at her desk and we began the interview.

#### *Victoria*

I first contacted Victoria via email regarding participating in the study. She replied almost immediately to my email that she was very interested in participating, and forwarded me her home telephone number so that I could contact her after work hours to discuss the study and provide her with specifics about what she would be required to do. I phoned Victoria the next evening and after a few minutes of conversation about work, the weather and comparing doctoral studies program requirements, I shared information with her about the study and the interview process. Learning that the interview would take approximately 90 minutes, Victoria felt that it would be best if the interview were on the weekend at her home. Both of us were available the coming Saturday, so we set the interview date for Saturday, 10:00 a.m. at her home. She gave me driving directions, along with a physical address so that I could google driving directions to her home. This time I remembered to request a landline and cell number and I emailed her my cell number and home number as

well. We agreed that she would contact me by telephone by 7:00 a.m. Saturday morning if there were a last minute need to reschedule.

On Saturday, I left home at 7:30 a.m. for the two hour drive to Victoria's home. The day, although bitterly cold, was sunny. As I headed east on the interstate for another interview, I began to reflect on my travels to date, all of them heading east. Perhaps there really was something to Jasmine's theory about the western part of North Carolina. She theorized during her interview session that African Americans did not thrive in the western part of North Carolina. Arriving in the destined city, I experienced no problems locating Victoria's subdivision or her home, thanks to the GPS Christmas gift. My husband was helping me with travel for my interviews and a GPS system was the best way to make my travel easier. As I pulled my car into her driveway, I saw the front door opening and a woman dressed in sweat pants and sweatshirt came out on the front porch. As I exited my car, she sprinted down the sidewalk to help me with my bag. She took the interview bag, made a comment about how cold it was and motioned me to follow her into the house. Once inside her home, it was instant warmth. I noticed a gas log fire in the fireplace in what must have been the family room. Although I do not drink coffee, the aroma of coffee brewing in the kitchen took me back to my childhood days when I woke up each morning to the smell of my parents brewing coffee in the kitchen. Her home was tastefully decorated in muted colors and it was evident that she had a green thumb. Beautiful green plants in beautiful planters made of various materials were visible in almost every room that I could see from the foyer.

We exchanged greetings and I thanked Victoria for agreeing to participate in the study. Our introductions were not formal and it was almost as if we had known each other for years. She shared how intrigued she was when she received my email about the study. She

was enrolled in a doctoral program that did not encourage qualitative studies, they must be at least mixed, so she was first impressed that there were places that would allow students to explore and examine perceptions. Then to examine the phenomenon of African American women missing in action from the superintendent's position in North Carolina really hit an interest chord with Victoria. She commented that research like this is long overdue in North Carolina and joked that she should have thought about it as a study.

She directed me to the formal dining room to the left of the foyer as this would be our interview space for the day. After declining a cup of coffee and opting for juice and a sweet roll instead, we prepared to start the interview.

### *Brenda*

I left home on a cloudy Tuesday morning around 8:30 a.m. heading towards the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Brenda and I had spoken the day before to confirm the time of the interview. No need to worry about directions anymore because I had my trusted GPS. I located the address of the schools administrative office from the North Carolina Public School directory and added it as a new location in my GPS. There was on the street parking, with parking meters. I searched my purse to locate a dollar in change for two hours of parking time. The security officer at the desk informed me that the school offices were located on the seventh floor. I had to sign in at the desk, after presenting my drivers license to the guard to be checked.

On the seventh floor, I observed the school district logo as I exited the elevator. There was a directional sign on the wall facing the elevators. Traveling down the hall through what was just a bit shy of a maze, I entered the double glass doors identified as the Human Resource Department. I told the receptionist that I had a 10:00 meeting with Mrs. Brenda.

The receptionist immediately asked if she was planning to meet me at this location rather than her office. A bit confused I asked if her office was located in a different location other than this one. The receptionist smiled as she told me that Mrs. Brenda's office was located in the annex building. The receptionist called Brenda to tell her that I was at the downtown location. She asked to speak with me, and immediately apologized for not telling me that she was not at the central downtown site but at the annex site. She said she preferred that I come over to her office so that we could have privacy for the interview. She would get someone there to direct me to the annex building which was only about three blocks away.

Brenda was waiting in the lobby when I arrived. We hugged and she joked about my scenic tour of the city. We headed to the stairs to her second floor office. The office area was huge because it is a former classroom in this renovated school. As we entered her office, I heard an automated voice saying announcing an incoming call and requesting to please pick up the phone. Brenda had selected a voice announcement rather than a bell or ring tone to announce incoming calls for her phone. She answered the call and then set the phone to automatic answer prior to returning the receiver to the cradle. Brenda's office had all of the conveniences of an entire office suite. There was a copier, fax machine, computer, printer, laminator, and laptop along with other office equipment. Everything in the office area was neatly arranged and one wall held a district wide staff development calendar for new teachers. There were several tables and chairs in the room, in addition to Brenda's desk and chair. We selected the round table near the window to conduct the interview. I set up my interview materials and after reviewing the Informed Consent form, the interview process and asking if there were any questions, I was ready to start interview number four. Brenda asked if her understanding that nothing that she said would be linked directly to her is

correct. I reassured her that all of the participants were assigned pseudonyms and school districts would not be identified. She commented that was good, because she had a lot to say and smiled. We started the interview.

### *Lisa*

Lisa was my fifth interview and the second interview that week. My traveling distance was less today because Lisa had to be in the local area for an appointment so we agreed to meet at a local restaurant at 1:30 p.m. Since this was my first interview in a public setting, I was a little anxious about the quality of the recording. I decided to arrive a little earlier than our scheduled meeting time to give myself an opportunity to test my tape recorder in the restaurant. As I made the 15 minute drive from my home to the interview site, I was thinking about a back-up interview site in the event the first site was too noisy. Lisa needed to stay within the area of the first location as that was less than five minutes away from her next appointment. Lisa apologized for her tardiness. We both decided not to order food, but to get the interview started so that we would have enough time to get through the interview and Lisa would not be late for her 3:30 appointment. I reviewed the Informed Consent Form that Lisa has already signed. She had no additional questions about the study. I reminded her to send me a copy of her updated resume and we started the interview.

### *Shayla*

After a couple of attempts to arrange a face to face interview with Shayla we decided that distance (she lives six hours from me) and our schedules were not going to accommodate a face to face session. I contacted Shayla to let her know that we would be able to record the interview if she was willing to be interviewed by phone. She was pleased that she was going to have an opportunity to participate in the study. I reviewed the Informed Consent Form

with Shayla and we agreed that I would email the form to her and she would return the signed form via email prior to the scheduled interview. She was also reminded to send an update copy of her resume. She emailed the resume as we talked on the phone.

Saturday arrived, it was my birthday and I was about to complete my sixth interview. This is the coldest day in January so far. It was two days before we celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday and three days before history was made in America with the inauguration of the first African American president. I thought for a moment, why then am I still asking the question, where are all of the African American female superintendents in North Carolina? Our county had just elected an Black man to the highest office in the land and it would seem that issues related to societal and institutional barriers that limit equal access, would not be the topic of conversation.

I had to use my landline with the recording device. I made a trial call to my husband on his cell phone to test the equipment to make sure it was ready to record. The test run was successful. I called Shayla's home and she answered on the first ring. We exchanged greetings and I checked to see if she can hear me and I checked to make sure the recorder was engaged and recording. I reviewed the information contained in the signed Informed Consent Form that Shayla had returned to me via email on Thursday and asked if she had any questions about the process or study. I conducted a check of the recorder to make sure that our conversation was being recorded. After the check, we started our interview.

### *Monique*

I was very excited about the upcoming interview with Monique. She was the only participant that I was able to locate who had actually applied for a superintendent's position in North Carolina. Monique was as excited about participating in the study as I was. Once

she heard the topic of the study, she commented that she had a lot to share and that she hoped that this study would be shared across the state. Her encouragement was to publish the study so that it would get the attention it merited. She felt that there was unfairness in the selection process and something needed to be done to level the playing field. Monique's interview added a new dimension to the study. Having experienced the screening, selection and hiring processes of a local school district, Monique's interview addressed some of the gaps about these processes that other participants could only speculate or assume. Her interview was filled with emotion, as she relived her experiences of applying for superintendent twice in the same district.

Monique lives in the southeastern region of North Carolina, which is a five to six hour drive from my home. Due to the distance, our schedules, and my desire to get the interviews completed in a timely way, we agreed that a telephone interview would be our best option. As we discussed possible interview times, Monique requested that we conduct the interview during the week, after nine o'clock p.m.

I followed the same protocol of sending the Informed Consent Form and requesting that it be read, signed and returned to me with a copy of her updated resume prior to the interview. Monique returned the signed form via email the next day. I called her on the evening of the scheduled interview. She answered the phone with a comment that she has been waiting on this day because she wanted to tell it all. We both had a laugh at her greeting. We reviewed the Informed Consent Form that she had signed and returned earlier and I checked to see if she had questions. Then we began the interview.

*Maria*

Maria accepted an Assistant Superintendent position in a district 60 miles from her home, but she resided on the weekends at her home which was only 20 miles from where I live. She rented an apartment in the school district where she worked during the week and on most weekends she traveled to her home in a nearby town. We arranged to meet on a Saturday at 1:00 p.m. at her home. Everything was in place and it was obvious that Maria was proud of her family because she had a sofa table just beyond the entryway that was filled with family photos. I commented on the pictures and she stated that she had a very large extended family and that they were all very close. She pointed out her grandparents, both deceased, and explained that she lived with them while growing up and that she felt that they had a lot of influence over the person that she had become. I noticed all of the collectables throughout her home. She stated that she liked making her home a reflection of her life, so she collected and added things that reflect who she was as a person.

Maria asked if the dining table located in the kitchen would be suitable for the interview and had already prepared the space by removing several of the place settings from the table. This space was excellent because it let me set up my tape recorder and note pads without being crowded. I set up for the interview, followed my regular protocol procedure of reviewing the Informed Consent Form and asked for questions prior to beginning the interview. The only question that Maria had was whether I needed anything to drink before starting the interview. I declined and thanked her for the offer and we started the interview.

*Yvette*

Yvette had been referred to me as a potential subject by one of my co-workers who was from the same hometown as Yvette. She was aware that Yvette had just defended her

dissertation and would be graduating soon. Once she mentioned her name, I immediately connected with her because I had known Yvette for years. I had lost track of her over the last five or six years because she had relocated. She was now employed in a large school district in North Carolina as a central office administrator.

I initially contacted Yvette via email, shared information about the study and asked if she would be interested in participating. She telephoned me after receiving my email and sounded excited to have been contacted about the study and that we would reconnect personally and professionally after so many years without talking to each other. I shared the research questions from the study and information from the Informed Consent form with her. She said she was excited about the study and thanked me several times for including her as a participant. I emailed her a copy of the Informed Consent Form and asked that it, along with a copy of her updated resume, be forwarded to me prior to the interview. Like several of the other participants, Yvette felt that she would be more comfortable interviewing away from her office, so we decided that the interview would be conducted at her home, which meant we would need to schedule a weekend interview.

### *Rhonda*

It was the day before my last interview and it was hard to believe that this part of the journey was to end. Throughout the experience I had met several women that I did not know, and was reconnected with several that I had lost contact with. I had an opportunity to hear the stories and experiences of nine, to date, African American female district administrators from across North Carolina. I also reflected on the different cities and towns across the state that I had an opportunity to visit. The places visited were diverse and different, yet had so much in common as did the stories that I heard from each of the

participants. As I drove home this Thursday evening reflecting on the last couple of months and all of the travel, extra batteries, note pads, and Informed Consent forms, along with the experiences of learning more about this state and the experiences of ten African American women who are leading and guiding school districts, my thoughts were bitter sweet. I was glad that tomorrow was to be the last time that I had to set out with my GPS, satellite radio, and interview bag on an interview mission.

Rhonda's name was provided to me on the list that I received from Personnel Administrators' Association. She was one of the few women who resided in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, and I was interested in making sure that she was included as one of the participants in the study to add geographical diversity to the study. I initially contacted Rhonda by phone to tell her about the study and to request her participation. Like all of the other women that I contacted about participating, Rhonda was as interested in reading the study as she was in participating. We scheduled her interview for a Friday at her office. I followed my procedure of sending the consent form and requesting an updated copy of her resume.

Friday arrived and I headed toward the Piedmont area. I arrived in less than an hour at the central office in Rhonda's school district. I checked in with the receptionist and announced my appointment with Dr. Rhonda. She entered the lobby and extended her arms to hug me. We introduced ourselves to each other as we walked down the hall to her office. Once in her office we spent more time getting to know each other, by sharing about ourselves and drawing connections between us. After a few minutes of conversation and establishing rapport, I reviewed the signed Informed Consent Form and asked if she had any questions before starting the interview. She had none and we started the interview.

## Major Themes

### *Success Indicators*

The following themes emerged from an analysis of the data from participant responses to the interview questions using a cross case analysis matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The themes were identified in the two distinct categories that framed this study. The success indicators that emerged from the present study were:

- Ethics;
- Influences;
- Expectations; and
- Preparedness.

Table 3 provides a synopsis of five major themes and twelve sub-themes that emerged from this study.

Table 3  
*Synopsis of the Five Major Success Indicator Themes*

Themes	Sub-Themes
Ethics	Care and Respect Fairness and Equity Honesty and Integrity Hard Work
Influence	Maternal Influence Early School Experiences Influence Other Family Members and Community Role Model Experiences Early Church Experiences Influence
Expectations	High Standards and Expectations from Family Members High Standards and Expectations for Self
Preparedness	Formal Education Preparation Career Pathways and Experiences

*Ethics* exemplifies the personal belief system as it relates to values, morals and work principles and habits viewed as critical to effective leadership. *Influence* refers to the impact that family relationships, early role models, and mentor relationships have on the personal and professional decisions of the participants. *Expectations* reference self and family expectations for doing well and being successful. *Preparedness* focuses on the educational training and robust experiences of the study participants.

### *Ethics*

Murtadha and Larson (1999) found woven through the stories of African American women school administrators, themes of a strong sense of community and a caring and relational approach to leading that is rooted in social justice. A similar theme of ethics was evident in this study participants' responses. Each participant expressed that she had a strong, uncompromising belief and value system that could not be shaken. Their belief systems were described as essential to their leadership style and defined who they were as a not only a leader but an individual. Research participants concurred with Murtadha and Larson who found that African American women chose to be viewed as nurturers, compassionate, and caring more for individuals than policies. Maria commented, "What I grew up with in terms of my family values of compassion, honesty and family and being respectful, transferred into my professional life."

Gilligan (1986) provided insight into the behavioral leadership skills practiced by women. She described women leaders as human resource builders and managers. Their cultural experiences are described as attributing to their use of consensus management and group collaboration. Brenda shared:

I believe a true leader is one who can inspire others to do the right thing. To have a group of moldable minds and be able to move them to do what is right for children, themselves or others, is how I identify a true leader. I would like to think that I am that person. I live to inspire others to take care of others.

Lisa added, “I have a passion for children. I want to help them to become all that they can be. That is why I make sure that the best person is hired to be in that classroom, it’s for the children.”

Yvette added:

I make it a point to be visible and to support teachers and staff. I make it a point to get to know the key players in the schools as well as in the community and let them get to know me. It is important that they know who I am and what I am [about]. In addition, I keep my word. When I say I am going to do something, I do it. I do not just talk it, I also walk it. To me that is important when leading people. They have to trust you and believe you.

Monique shared:

I am a people person. I enjoy discussing matters with individuals to reach a solution. I cannot be a dictator. There are times when I have to be the authority, but generally, I believe in inviting the players to the table for including them in the conversation. In all of my job assignments, this is the position that I have taken and I truly believe this approach has earned me respect as an administrator in my school district.

All of the study participants indicated a strong belief in honesty, equity, respectful treatment, being fair and just to all, without compromise. Williams and Willower (1983) found that women school administrators interviewed for their study, tended to follow a *Log*

*Cabin Ethos.* The Log Cabin Ethos description was used to encompass virtues traditionally valued by our society such as; doing ones best, being honest, fair and open while treating everyone equally. The participants in this study referred to their personal commitment to fairness and equity in their positions as school administrators. Jasmine commented:

My leadership style does not permit me to make differences between the haves and the have-nots. I cannot and will not ever make differences. Political correctness matters not to me. Sometimes it does get a little frustrating because I do not always know how to apply the rules when political moves allow the rules to be changed on any day at any time; however, I can say, the change does not come from me. I am fair to all, those who work in the plants and those who own the plant; I treat them all with the same respect, courtesy and equal access.

On the issue of fairness and equity, Monique stated: “I believe in treating everyone fairly, they know that about me and they respect me for it.” Shayla shared, “The Board of Education knows, because I have said it to them on a number of occasions, that I am going to do what is right. I don’t have favorites.” Rhonda commented, “I have only one way of treating people and that is the right way. I am going to do things the right way while respecting all who are involved.”

The Log Cabin Ethos is further demonstrated by the majority of the participants as articulated in their unwillingness to compromise their integrity, no matter the cost. Monique commented:

I cannot sacrifice my integrity for anyone. I am not changing for anyone. If you cannot accept me for who I am, then I am sorry. I am fair and I am not going to give this person or that person an unfair advantage. I am not going to play games. I am

not going to sacrifice my integrity because this [integrity] is all that I have. Losing it is not worth any job. I am not changing who I am.

Brenda added:

I let my work speak for me. What I do for others, how I assist others when they are in need speaks more about me than I could ever say about myself or put on a resume. I think that it is what you do for people, how you treat people that speak volumes about who you are and what you are capable of doing.

Shakeshaft (1985) interviewed more than 100 female administrators during her study to collect data on how women view their work worlds. Most women in the study indicated that they did not copy men, nor did they think what works for men, works for them. The effective female administrator is described by Shakeshaft as working to get the job done, utilizing methods that are effective for her. Women have knowledge of a female culture that includes a strong work ethic and socialization that they bring to the school administrators role, according to Shakeshaft. A study of elementary principals by Kmetz and Willower (1982) documented several ways in which women's ways of leading were different from men. These ways include women spend more time in unscheduled meetings; women made fewer trips from the school building; and women observed teachers considerably more than male administrators.

Pitner and Ogawa (1981) in a study of male and female superintendents found that women prepared their written correspondences at home whereas men did theirs at school. He also found that women moved throughout the building observing teachers more than men did. Although women and men carry out the same responsibilities, they may put a different emphasis on the importance of the task. The participants in this study often commented on

their work ethic. They described their commitment to hard work as a means of gaining respect from staff members and supervisors.

Maria said, “I have always been busy. I have gone to school and worked at the same time for a long time. I do not go to school now, but I teach at a nearby university. Hard work does not bother me, it is what I do.” Yvette added, “I always try to work hard and make sure that I treat people the way I want to be treated. Lisa stated, “My work is never finished. I am always trying to do more just to make a difference.” Danielle reflecting on her first administrative position as assistant principal in a large high school recalled:

I worked day and night to prove myself. I went to work early and stayed late. I was not just hanging around, I was working. I wanted to make sure that I was always on top of my game by being prepared. I wanted to gain the respect of those that I was responsible for leading. I worked hard to make it happen.

Victoria remembered her first principal assignment and comments, “I worked almost around the clock doing anything I could to improve the school.”

### *Influences*

Based on an analysis of the data, the theme of influences emerged to indicate that the participants’ socio-cultural and early schooling experiences influenced their perceptions of who they are as leaders today. The participants shared stories about early life experiences, role models and mentor relationships that they perceived as influential in shaping who they became as leaders and as individuals.

All of the participants attributed their current success and confidence as school leaders to what they described as strong and positive early influences of mothers, other family members, community role models, teachers and church involvement. These entities

were identified by the participants as having shaped their views within and beyond their communities. According to Wright and Tuska (1965), childhood influences often affect career decisions for adults. Important adults, particularly parents, influence not only career decisions, but learned skills and habits the influenced individual will take with them and rely upon throughout their lives (Wright and Tuska, 1965).

One of the recurring sub-themes throughout the interviews was the influence of mothers and in some cases grandmothers on their families and community. Danielle recalled how her grandmother would cook, clean, nurture, and discipline her and her sister while her mother worked. She referred to her mother as a strong, determined, single mother who did what she needed to do to take care of her family. Danielle commented, “Remembering what my grandmother and mother went through just to raise us, is what keeps me focused today. I am standing on the backs of many strong women, my mother and grandmother just being two of them, who made a way for me. I must do the same for others.” Lisa added, “My mother told me everyday that it was up to me to put something up there (points to head) that no one can take away from me.” Brenda recalled the influence her mother had in her decision to become an educator:

When I was growing up my mother was a teacher assistant. She later went back to school after all of us were in school and completed a degree in elementary education. She became a pre-school teacher. I can recall, even before she completed her degree having many conversations with her about teaching. She identified teaching as a safe career, one that you would never have to worry about finding a job. Three of the four children in my family are in education. My younger sister is an attorney. My mom was the reason I went into education.

Maria commented, “I was pushed by two very strong females, my mother and my grandmother. However, I was not pushed somewhere that I did not want to be. The encouragement was there, the pushing was there, but that’s ok. I wanted it and I need it.”

Jasmine added:

My parents always encouraged us. Excellence in everything was always important to my mom. My mom quit school when she was in eighth grade to take care of her younger siblings after her father died and her mother became very ill. She had three younger siblings and a sick mother to take care of. My mother always dreamed of going back to school, but she never did. My mom realized that education was a way out for her children, a way to become better and a way that would help us reach our dreams. We wanted to make our mother happy by accomplishing some of the things that she dreamed of, but never realized in her own life. She was living when I received my bachelors and both masters, but she was not here for the doctorate, but I know she is proud.

Another sub-theme that emerged in the influences theme was the influence other family members, teachers, early role models and mentors had on shaping the lives of the participants. Each participant discussed how they felt positive interactions with former teachers, supportive family members and mentors encountered early in their careers, as well as community organization participation, namely the church had influenced their development of a professional belief system.

Participants shared ways in which early school experiences and teacher interaction influenced them. Yvette stated, “I had seven aunts who were all teachers. I wanted to be just like them. They were my role models.”

Rhonda shared:

Being the product of a segregated school through high school, our teachers were very much a part of our community. They sometimes lived as close as next door or up the street. They made you feel as though they really cared about me as a person. They would not accept mess. They helped me develop a sense of pride in all that I did then and do today.

Shayla commented, "I loved my first grade teacher and I wanted to be just like her."

Danielle recalled the early influences of her third grade teacher:

She was kind and compassionate. She didn't yell at her students, yet we all respected her and wanted to please her. Now that I think about it, she had very high standards and expected us to live up to them. She wanted us to do our best. She held us accountable for our own success. Often she would say to us, I am giving you what you need to be successful in fourth grade. It's up to you to take it. I can't go with you, but you can take what I give you with you. In some ways, I am still holding on to that philosophy. I try to learn something from every experience that I have. I try to do my best always. I try to hold on to the good things that I learn.

Victoria recalled the influence of her high school English teacher who influenced her.

According to Victoria, her senior English teacher recognized her ability to write and recommended her for the school newspaper staff. Victoria was the only African American student on the school newspaper staff. She stated, "She saw my abilities and looked beyond what I looked like on the outside. It is because of her that I became an English teacher."

Influence of other family members, community role models, and early career mentors were identified as sub-themes from the participants' interviews. Every participant identified

as least one family member, community figure or early career colleague/mentor who helped influence her. Shayla said:

My older brother is a math whiz. I was the youngest child, so he would always take time to teach me something new about math. He inspired me to want to teach because I thought he was so patient, kind and smart that all teachers must be that way. He wasn't a teacher by trade, but he was a teacher at heart. And I wanted to be just like him.

Danielle added that she always surrounded herself with friends who had the same goals and aspirations of attending college and being successful as she did. She stated, "Sometimes we were identified as snobs because we wanted to do well in school, get good grades and would not hang out with the party crowd." Danielle did not identify all of her early influences as positive. She recalled that her older sister had a tremendous influence on her. She states, "I did not want to be like her, a young single mom. I wanted to rise above where she was. She actually motivated me to put education at the top of my priority list. I loved her; I just didn't want to be like her." In sharing how community members influenced her development,

Jasmine explained:

I was always impressed by those in the community who would embrace others, no matter how different they were. They would not get involved in cliques; they just wanted to help those who needed help. They appeared comfortable with all people. At one time, especially when I was growing up, we had community leaders just like this. They cared about the community and the people in the community. They are the ones who influenced me the most.

Lastly, experiences and opportunities outside of the home were described by the participants as instrumental in shaping their perspectives on caring, their sense of responsibility and shaping leadership skills. The experiences and opportunities were defined as school activities, club and organization participation, and mainly church involvement. Church participation, according to the analyzed data, provided opportunities for the participants to observe their teachers in a setting outside of the school. Church involvement also allowed the participants an opportunity to develop their own skills as orators and leaders by providing opportunities to participate in various church programs and activities. Yvette commented, "Growing up in church, where a number of people were in education had a strong influence on me." Brenda shared, "My church was very influential because that was just what we did growing up. We went to Sunday School and then to church. Back in the seventies and eighties there were a lot of people in our church who were educators. So you not only got encouragement at home, you got it at school and in church." Victoria added, "The church was the center of my community. I participated in plays and other activities that gave me an opportunity to develop speaking skills and develop stage presence. Both have been helpful to me now as an administrator." Shayla concurred that participating in church activities and having responsibilities within her church helped her to develop life long leadership skills. She recalls being the church recorder from the age of thirteen. In her role as recorder, she was responsible for collecting all of the announcements and compiling them into one publication for church members so that they would know what was happening around the church. Rhonda added,

School and church were the two mainstays in my community when I was growing up.

This is where I received opportunities to demonstrate leadership skills. I was

president of this and a member of that...and I was expected to perform with excellence.

### *Expectations*

Expectations refer to family and self imposed standards of doing well, being successful and a prospect of hope of good things to come. Several of the participants were children of high school dropouts or they were first generation college graduates in their families. Families and communities expected them to do well and be successful in life. The participants attributed their success to the high standards and expectations that were set by their families, and their communities. Jasmine explained:

My mom cleaned houses for white families and my dad was a chef. My parents may not have had much in materials, but one thing that they did have was high expectations for their children. They expected all of us to get the best education that we could and to become self sustaining adults.

Rhonda added,

My mother worked hard to keep a roof over our heads and to provide me with things that I needed and sometimes wanted. She did not expect me to go to school to be seen or to show off. She expected me to go to school and learn. She expected me to go to college. We never talked about if I went to college it was always when I went to college.

Victoria commented on how her father was instrumental in helping shape her professional behaviors, even early in her life. In her words:

My father was especially instrumental in helping shape the professional that I have become. He demanded that I always gave it my best, no matter what the task. I can

remember he wanted to be the first to see my report card. He would question my grades. He always wanted to know if I gave it my best.

Lisa shared:

I remember my brother who is a superintendent, telling me that he always knew that I would go to college. He said he never thought that he would [go], but he always knew that I would go to college. In fact, he was planning to help my mother send me to college, by staying home, getting a job and working after he graduated from high school. I don't know how he knew that I would go to college. I guess it was the high expectations for the first-born. I think the expectation was there for me to pave the way for the others. I was expected to set the standard that children from this family were college graduates.

Several of the participants stated that families seemed to have a hope that the next generation would always achieve more. Parents were described as having unspoken expectations. Some things were never discussed as options. Not attending college for most of the participants was never an option. Parents, older siblings, extended family members as well as community members used language of "when you go to college" versus "if you go to college." Most of the participants felt there was no other option.

Yvette commented:

Growing up in a family with seven aunts who were educators, it was an expectation that the next generation would do better. Going to college was never discussed with me and my brothers. My parents established an unspoken expectation, you will go to college and you will do well. There was no question about it. We went to college and I think we did pretty good. At least we all graduated.

High expectations and standards transferred from family and community measures of excellence and success to self-imposed standards by the participants. Several participants commented on how they have established their own standards for measuring their professional success. Monique stated, “I am the type person who wants to be at the highest point of anything I do. I want to shine. I want to take charge. I push myself to be the best. Why not aim for number one?” Maria added:

I have always been determined. Some would refer to it as bossy. I won’t say that I am bossy. I say that I am determined. I know what I want to achieve and I go after it. I think females are sometimes labeled bossy when they have high standards and won’t back down from them [standards]. People misunderstand confident and sure. According to Jasmine, when a female asks questions, will not settle for any old answer, and attempts to hold someone accountable, she is described as “a hell-raiser in panty hose.” Danielle added that even though her mother worked and her grandmother was busy helping raise she and her sister, both of them expected the best from both girls. She continued to share how an extended family member helped set the standard of measure for success in her family:

I had an aunt who lived in New York. She encouraged us to always do well in school so that we could get good jobs and have comfortable lives when we became adults. Living in New York by itself set a standard for me. I aspired to finish high school, get a college degree and move to a large city, returning to North Carolina in the summer and at Christmas to visit. My aunt made me believe I could do anything that I wanted to do with hard work and determination. Her success set the bar high for me. I wanted to be just like her so I also set my standards high.

### *Preparedness*

Preparedness focuses on the educational training and robust experiences of the study participants. According to Dana and Bourisaw (2006) accessing a quality higher education in preparation for educational leadership is often achieved by women who live in the proximity of an institution that offers the program; can organize their lives so that multiple demands upon their time can be managed; and has the support (emotional/physical/fiscal) from family. In 2007 85% of the women serving as assistant principal and district leaders nationwide held superintendent certificates (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Sixty-one percent of the female principals and district administrators held doctoral degrees. Seven of the participants in the study had earned doctoral degrees and three were enrolled in doctoral programs. The study participants expressed no concerns with accessing training programs. Many felt that they organized their lives to accommodate new responsibility and had the support of family and friends as they completed their degrees. Maria commented:

I wanted two Master's degrees, that's just what I wanted. I wanted one in elementary education and the other in school administration. I organized and planned my career to allow me to accomplish both degrees in a fairly short period of time. My family encouraged me to do what I needed to do to get things done. When I made the decision to return for my doctoral degree, it was challenging, but I had the support of those around me who wanted to see me succeed.

Yvette shared:

In my doctoral cohort there were eight African American women and we quickly formed a bond. Only two of the eight have graduated to date. A few had to drop out due to family obligations and responsibilities. But I can say the eight of us tried to be

the support that we needed. Not all of us had children, but we tried to assist when we could, we studied together, shared notes, even shared meals when we had to. We wanted to see each of us make it through the process, so we helped in any way that we could.

Brenda responded:

I thought that I would one day like to teach at the university level. I also know that in order to be able to teach at the university level, it is best to have the doctoral degree. So I enrolled in the program. My family supported me in my decision, plus I can do this from home. I only have to travel less than 50 miles on the weekends. The program is so convenient.

Earning a doctoral degree was viewed by several of the participants as accomplishing a personal challenge. Shayla said, “My professional goal after receiving my degree was not for the purpose of becoming a superintendent. I just always wanted my doctoral degree. I am never satisfied if there is something left that I didn’t at least try.”

Monique added, “When I first started working on my doctorate degree in 2002, I did it because it was a personal goal. I just wanted my doctoral degree. I wanted to be Dr. Monique.” Jasmine viewed her journey through the doctoral program as a spiritual test. Jasmine had other personal issues that she was dealing with in her life at the time she was approached to participate in the doctoral program at the university. She felt that if she could meet this challenge and be successful, she would be able to handle other obstacles that seemed to be personally weighing her down. She accepted the challenge and three years later, she earned her doctoral degree, which she described as one of her greatest accomplishments.

There were participants who elected to earn doctoral degrees because they viewed the preparation as the stepping-stone to other career goals. Lisa shared, “I plan on applying for the superintendent’s position in my district. My superintendent plans to retire at the end of the June. I know that the doctorate is looked on as a favorable requisite for the superintendent’s position.” Rhonda added, “It’s unfortunate in a country that just elected a Black man to the highest office to say, but if I ever wanted to ascend beyond the building level principal, I was going to need my doctorate. And that’s what I did; I earned my degree in case I decided one day that I would like to be superintendent or something else. It’s better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.” Yvette concurred:

One of these days I plan to apply for a superintendent’s position. Every job posting that I have read in the last three or four years, clearly states doctorate preferred. In my case being a Black female seeking a superintendent position without the doctorate degree would mean no consideration for the job. No need to give a reason to be excluded. At least on paper, I will meet all of the requirements.

Monique who had stated that she initially wanted to earn her doctorate because of the personal challenge of earning a terminal degree shared that she quickly changed her focus when she learned that her current superintendent would be resigning. She stated, “The first time I applied for the superintendent’s position I did not have my doctorate. So I was driven to complete my degree, because I saw it as a requirement to accessing the next level. I wanted to be as ready as I could for the next-time.” Rhonda summed it up by saying, “I always wanted to be prepared. I never wanted anyone to question my formal training or my credentials, or lack thereof. There are so many times you can’t even get your foot in the door without the right papers.”

### *Barriers and Challenges*

Alston's (1999) framework identified five themes of barriers and challenges experienced by African American women who aspired to the superintendency. These themes were used to establish part of the framework of this study and inform several of the interview questions.

The themes of barriers and challenges evolving from this study were:

- Oppression;
- Selection; and
- Disconnection.

Table 4 provides a synopsis of the three major themes and seven sub-themes of barriers and challenges that emerged from this study.

Table 4  
*Synopsis of the Three Themes of Perceived Barriers and Challenges*

Themes	Sub-Themes
Oppression	Institutional Structures and Practices Societal and Cultural Perceptions Political Clout
Selection	Hiring Processes and Practices Unwritten Rules Hidden Agendas and Vendettas
Disconnection	Lack of Professional Networks and Support Systems

*Oppression* focuses on institutional, societal and political barriers and challenges experienced or identified by the study participants. *Selection* refers to the screening, selection and hiring practices of a school superintendent by Boards of Education and search committees. *Disconnection* identifies limited access to power connections and describes the absence of support systems and formal and informal professional networks that have been

perceived or experienced by the study participants. Using the voices of the study participants and current research literature, the following section addresses these barriers and challenges themes emerging from this study.

### *Oppression*

According to Dana and Bourisaw (2006), institutional, societal, and political workplace barriers have been systematically constructed as a result of cultural attitudes, behaviors and practices. For the purpose of this study, discussion of oppression focuses on the three sub-themes: 1) institutional structures and practices, 2) societal and cultural perceptions, and 3) political clout. These sub-themes were identified by the participants as barriers and challenges faced by African American women in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina.

Cotter et al., (2001) identified the glass ceiling as an institutional structure or practice that artificially limits professional advancement for women in the workplace. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) wrote that glass ceilings continue to exist in spite of state and federal legal protections prohibiting employment discrimination. Women continue to find it harder to move to higher level managerial positions because of barriers that are erected by the organization. Meyerson (2004) pointed out that it is not just the ceiling that is holding women back, it is the entire structure of the organization from the foundation, to the beams, and walls even the air that restricts promotion for women in the workplace.

According to Gyant (1996), Black women are often targeted to handle difficult curriculum and instruction issues. When it comes to secondary school administration experience, Black women are rarely afforded an opportunity to serve at this level. The secondary level, along with district office administrative positions in the areas of finance or

human resources, are considered a part of the pathway to the superintendent's office (Shakeshaft, 1999). The secondary principalship provides opportunities to interact with the public through school sports programs, manage large budgets and supervise maintenance and facility staff. These experiences are identified by selection committees and board of education members as preferred experiences for a superintendent. Based on the past experience of the participants in this study, it would seem logical that they would identify limited access to critical experience areas as an institutional barrier.

The following table shows the experience levels of the study participants in the pathways defined in the literature as being desired pathways to the superintendency:

Table 5  
*Participant Career Pathway Experience*

(Secondary) High School Experience	(Secondary) Middle School Experience	District Level Finance/Maintenance/Facilities	District Level Human Resources
Jasmine-Principal Danielle-Principal	Yvette-Principal	Maria-Facilities	Jasmine Shayla Monique Lisa

Subtle comments are made in the workplace suggesting that the general population does not have confidence in a woman handling the job of high school principal or school superintendent. It is often the organization or the institution that establishes the rules of assigning employees to positions as well as promoting the attitudes of how women are viewed as competent within the school setting (Skrla, 2003).

All of the participants agreed that they had experienced what they felt were certain barriers in place within the workplace that made it difficult for them to break through the glass ceiling. Rhonda commented:

I know there is a ceiling there, and I know that the make up of that ceiling is just as invisible as the ceiling itself. The powers that be will never admit to there being boundaries or limits within my school district when it comes to access to certain administrative positions. I know from some of the things that I have experienced and witnessed, that I am right. There are subtle things that have happened within my district that let me know there is a perceived place for women in this district and that is where we are going to be assigned or placed and we should be happy with the assignment given. For the Black woman it is even more complicated because we have to also be the right fit.

Societal and cultural influences are identified as socially constructed and accepted attributes and characteristics along with practices, assigned to males and females (Skrla, 2003). According to G.a.L. (1995), masculine traits are valued more than feminine traits in almost every society. Women who adopt masculine leadership qualities in an attempt to be successful in what is perceived as the male role are viewed negatively because of the societal construction of what is females. The sub-theme of societal and cultural influences was evident throughout the interviews with the participants. During the interviews, each of the participants communicated that society or the communities in which they live believe that a woman's place is in the home. Jasmine stated:

We still have those who think our place is at home raising a family. And that is my first ministry, but just as my job does not define who I am, neither does my status as a

wife or mother define who I am. We still have those who believe that a man's schedule is more flexible and that it is ok for him to be away from home on business, but not a woman. I think society views us as unfit if we are not home with supper on the table every night, washing, ironing and housekeeping.

The superintendency is charged with politics and conflicts to a far greater extent than other roles in education. The ability of the superintendent to emerge from conflict is directly linked in society to constructions of power and authority. In our society, the construction of power and authority in a leadership role is viewed as the responsibility of the male. The superintendency is described as a political balancing act, not only with the board of education but also with other community and public entities including city and county commissioners with whom superintendents must establish positive work relationships. Brenda commented:

A superintendent, who is not afraid of doing her job, is probably going to lose her job because of the politics. The superintendent must be an advocate for all children, but often these are not the children that the political power structures value. The superintendent is a powerful position in most communities, including mine.

The exercise of power is construed as a male prerogative and not one that is viewed to be feminine by nature. A female authority figure is often described as problematic by staff, the community and the schools' governing board when she attempts to exercise the authority that society sees as the right of the male. Study participants felt that females are viewed as weak if they handle situations with care and compassion for others and too harsh and trying to be like a man if they relied on their power and authority in making decisions.

Maria stated:

I find it very difficult to accept comments such as she is trying to be like a man or she is acting like a man, when women have to make the tough decisions. They have to be made; it does not matter if a woman or a man makes the decision. Are we so programmed in society to believe that women don't know what they are doing as leaders of organizations and that they don't know how to make the right decision based on the situation?

Women are often not invited nor do they feel welcomed at the table of groups of political leaders within a community. When women are present it is because they had to be there by virtue of their position, but they often feel overlooked and not included in the discussion. Most of the study participants had similar experiences with being excluded from the power group discussions. They described the men in these settings as very dominating, boisterous and basically ignoring the female in the room. As participants, they were not asked for their opinions or for input. When the females contributed to the discussion, they felt as if no one listened, their voices are silenced. Lisa observed, "If I were a superintendent, I would have to deal every day with the problems that men have with me as a woman. Their opinions and actions towards me that translate into a clear message that I am not respected as a professional leader because I am a Black woman. It's as if what I have to contribute to the conversation does not matter."

Perception describes the pre-conceived thinking of others as it relates to women as leaders of organizations. According to Brunner (2000b), cultural perceptions, expectations, norms, and mental models, condition the development and interaction of children and even as they grow into adults. This conditioning is reinforced throughout adulthood in the form of

three sub-themes that emerged in the study. The three sub-themes of gender structuring, racism and cultural practices will be discussed in the context of barriers and challenges in ascending to the role of superintendent by African American females.

Gender is an inherent and ever-present barrier in modern day society (Skrla, 2003). Research on women's leadership of school districts during the past two decades provides testimony to the male dominated profession and to the differential treatment of women who occupy the superintendent position in school districts. Skrla (2003) writes that attributes and characteristics assigned to the male and female genders are not inherently biological but are socially constructed. Women are constructed as less competent, dependent, less logical, and less objective. Men are constructed as everything that is not feminine or female (Skrla, 2003). According to Skrla, gendered identities depend on social acquisition and community perception of the male and female roles. Participants in this study agreed that neither power nor the exercising of authority is viewed in a positive light by the community when females are the ones making the decisions. All agreed that they had experienced situations in which they were left to make some pretty hard decisions as they related to the operation of their schools or departments. They all had experienced various levels of opposition from constituents. Most of the participants felt that if the same decision had been made by a male, the male would have been celebrated or congratulated for being able to make such a tough the decision. Danielle explained that when women make the difficult decisions their decisions are questioned, and they feel that they must explain and justify to teachers, other administrators and sometimes board members why they made the decision and because of the questioning the women often second guess the decision that they made. Yvette summed it up when she stated:

I went to a middle school as principal that had never had a female as principal. I was pretty much used to the race issue coming up from time to time, but I was not expecting my gender to be more of the issue. Whenever I had to make the hard calls, there was a tendency for my staff to refer to me as the b- word. I really believe that if I were a man, I would have been viewed as taking charge, being in control of the situation, standing up and doing the right thing. Women's decisions are almost always questioned and challenged.

Gender structuring is evident in commonly accepted cultural practices involving sex-role conditioning. One of the most traditional sex-role stereotypes is the woman as family and home caregiver. As mentioned earlier, all of the participants made reference to a community expectation that the place for the wife and the mother was in the home and especially not in major decision making and large organization leadership roles.

Racism insists that issues of race are not sociological abbreviations but are permanent social conditions because they are endemic components of our social fabric. Racism consists of both overt and hidden manifestations of discrimination in the political, legal and organizational and social arenas. Racism is practiced as a normal part of every day life and can be so woven into the fabric of a community that it goes unnoticed by many in the community.

Jasmine commented:

I really don't think that North Carolina is open and willing to embrace Black female leadership, although I don't think that most North Carolina leaders would ever admit it. Let's be real here for a moment, there are still places in North Carolina that I would not apply for a superintendent's position because they don't look like me there

and they don't want anybody that looks like me in their town. That is reason enough for me never to apply.

Each of the study participants identified the effects of "double whammy" as a barrier that limits access to the superintendency for African American women. Andrews and Simpson-Taylor (1995) identified double whammy as one of the biggest barriers faced in the workplace by African American women. Double whammy is described as negative race and gender based stereotypes that create workplace problems for women of color, especially as they relate to issues of job promotion and advancement (Andrews & Simpson-Taylor, 1995). Brenda summed up the sentiments of the study participants when she stated, "We are slapped on either side, some will have issues with us because we are female, others will have issues with us because we are women and then there's the group that will have issues with us because we are who we are, black female leaders."

Political clout was identified by the participants as a barrier in ascending to the superintendency. Political clout is recognizable when power, control and influence belong to a particular group within a community (Merriam, 1998) Those in communities who are able to establish or inherit a political power base within the community are identified as the driving forces behind what happens in that community (Ortiz, 1998). The participants described the political structure within their communities as powerful and influential. "If the powers that be, don't want something to happen, it won't happen," commented Jasmine. She went on to say, "Often times the voices of the oppressed are never heard. Women and minorities around here are better seen than heard."

Participants felt that as long as Blacks were not represented in the political arenas within their districts, there will always be under representation of minorities within all areas

of control of the political structure. One participant commented that Blacks within her district had no voice. Although there may be one or two Blacks sitting on boards, her feelings were they were not there to represent the community.

She stated:

It's like the community works hard to get Black representation on our local boards and it takes about two months before it seems that they have sold out. They don't speak for the community. They won't ask the hard questions. It's like they are absent from the process.

Alston (1999) identified the lack of awareness of political maneuvers as a barrier to Black women ascending to the superintendency. All of the participants said that they had established relationships with members of their boards of education. Although all of the participants felt that they knew their county commissioners and that their county commissioners knew them on a name only basis, only three of the participants reported that they have established working relationships with their commissioners or city council members. One participant has served a mayor of the town in which she lives.

### *Selection*

Selection for the purpose of this study refers to three sub-themes of hiring practices, unwritten employment rules, and hidden agendas and personal vendettas identified as barriers to the African American women ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina schools. This study offers an understanding of the complex mix of the screening and selection process employed by selection committees, spoken and unspoken selection criteria used in the process of selecting a new superintendent. Each of the three sub-themes that emerged in this

study will be discussed as they were identified in impacting the selection process of a school superintendent.

Just as stereotypical beliefs effect the manner in which women, especially women of color are viewed, elected boards of education who hire superintendents have allowed negative stereotypes about African American women to influence their decision making responsibilities regarding qualified candidates (Tallerico, 2000). All of the participants agreed that there needs to be some change in or control of the power given to boards of education as it relates to selection and hiring of superintendents through legislation. Hiring the superintendent is one of the legislative powers given to local boards of education in the state of North Carolina (Public School Laws of North Carolina, 2007). They pointed out that there are some systems across the state that have implemented various ways to make the selection process an inclusive one, that has what they described as a built in checks and balances system. Some systems elect to diversify their selection committees, including teachers, parents and community members along with representatives from the board on the screening and interviewing committees. Some school districts elect to make their selection process as transparent as possible, in some cases presenting the top three of four candidates in public forums. The participants agreed that the school districts that choose to remain silent and secretive about the process are often those boards that have members that are carrying out personal agendas through the selection process. Not only are candidates from inside of the system victims to this type of guarded, seemingly secretive process, but women, particularly African American women fall victim to narrow thinking and biased selection processes. Shayla commented, "I hope that boards of education use the same selection criteria for African American women as they do for white males or any other male."

In other cases, participants cited experiences with districts that give the perception of having already selected or targeted the next person to fill the role and identify him as the chosen one. Many of the participants commented that often before a position is posted, everyone in the district knows who will get the position. Brenda stated, “We know that certain positions are going to be filled with friends or former co-workers of our current superintendent or in some cases with friends or family members of one of the board members. The sad part about all of this is that there is no shame in how these things take place within our system.”

Several of the participants noted that timing was a factor in the selection process. They felt that sometimes the board is searching for new direction, fresh insight and the only way to get it is to look at someone who comes with experience and is from outside of a school district. African American women are at a disadvantage when it comes to prior experience. It is challenging for a female to uproot family and move to another part of the state for employment whenever it is available; however this is sometimes the only way to get a first chance at a superintendent position. By deciding to remain in the hometown area and seeking employment only in that district the opportunity for appointment as a superintendent is limited. If we pair the limited opportunity to a need for district redirection or change with fresh ideas, it may be possible that some of the appointments as superintendent have nothing to do with race or gender.

Tallerico’s 2000 study advances an understanding of the complex mix of the screening and selection practices shared among selection consultants and members of boards of education. These practices include spoken and unspoken criteria and rules that influence the process of superintendent selection. Many of the study participants felt that there were

unwritten rules for selection, that those applying nor the general public and sometimes certain members of the board are not aware exist. Most communities are infused with long-standing traditions and practices. These traditions and practices generally include unspoken views or criteria on the leadership within that community. Although never discussed and never written as part of a job qualification, many boards of education and community leaders and members have criteria that are often reflective of the belief systems of the community. There are shared ideas about who would be best received in that community as a leader. The term the *right fit* would best describe what happens when selection committees or boards of education attempt to select a community leader like a superintendent based on community tradition and acceptance. Yvette in reference to fitting in said:

One thing that I feel that would help me when I decide to apply for a superintendent position is to make sure that the county or district is a good match for me. I want to make sure that I fit into the community, that they can embrace me for who I am and allow me to operate fully so that I can make a difference. Not all areas of our state function that way. They have a way of doing business and you either fit the mold, learn to conform or hit the road.

There was agreement among the study participants about concerns with the selection process implemented by school systems to hire school superintendents. There was a general consensus and concern that state law gives such an important responsibility to boards of education without the board having any accountability to another agency or governing body. They were of the opinion that it appeared as if board of education members are elected and then left to enforce their individual or collective powers which sometimes included carrying out personal vendettas and agendas within the school community.

Monique, the only study participant who had actually applied for a superintendent's position, explained how her board of education conducted a community wide survey, surveying teachers, other staff members, community leaders and parents in order to get input on what the community was looking for in the next superintendent of schools. According to Monique, the response was overwhelming that the community wanted someone from inside of the school district. The last superintendent had been someone from another part of the state who did not seem to connect to the community. This lack of connection was realized in his short tenure in the district. After just a couple of years of serving as superintendent, he decided to resign from the position and return home. There was no added pressure to his position that resulted in his resignation; in fact, he had the full support of members of the board. His family never relocated to the area, and after a couple of years he decided to reconnect with his family. The community expressed through the survey a desire to have someone who was already a part of the community, someone who was vested in the community and would be committed to providing some continuity in leadership to the school district. Monique shared that her name was listed as the preferred candidate for the position on several of the surveys. After receiving and reviewing the survey responses, when questioned by the newspaper as to how the survey results would be used in the superintendent search, the board chair announced that the board would not put much stock in the survey responses. Monique attributes the decision to not use the survey as a result of the survey answers not going the way most of the board members wanted them to go. Monique stated:

There are far too many people who aspire to a board of education seat just to carry out personal agendas and vendettas. Too many board members are self-serving in

their role. Very few have the well-being of the child in mind. They either want to get back at a teacher or administrator for something that happened to their child or they want to carry out personal vendettas against someone they have carried a grudge against for years. I was told by many community members that one of our board members made public statements that it would be over his/her dead body before I would serve as superintendent in this district. This was a personal vendetta against me for some disagreement that our daughters had years ago.

### *Disconnection*

Disconnection refers to the lack of professional networks and support systems for African American women in school leadership roles in North Carolina. Shakeshaft (1987) noted that there was no underestimating the importance of mentors and sponsors in the socialization and success of aspiring educational administrators. Nine participants acknowledged that they had what they would consider professional mentors. Jasmine, the one who stated that she did not have a mentor, said, "I do not have what I would consider a professional mentor and sadly I have no sponsors either. I talk with colleagues from time to time, but I don't see them as mentors." Most of the mentors identified by the participants were either the first principals they worked for or a current or former superintendent or director. Seven of the participants identified a white male as their professional mentor. Even though they all commented that their mentor had nurtured their development in school leadership and often encouraged them to pursue other levels of administration, none of the participants said that they had been encouraged by their mentor to pursue a superintendent position.

Catalyst (2008) reports that women's success in the work place is based in part on women's access to informal networks, especially those networks that can provide important information. The lack of access to such networks has been identified as one of the primary barriers for women of color. A lack of involvement and support from critical figures, identified as supporters from within a professional network, have been known to block women's and other members of underrepresented groups from achieving career aspirations (Catalyst, 2008). According to Brunner (2000a) there are career goals that may not be reached by certain segments of the population because systematic barriers have emerged or been fostered by those who are leading and in power. Without assistance and support from others, the systematic barriers prevent some of the population from reaching their goals and ambitions. In these cases the result is injustice in the workplace.

Though each of the participants identified a colleague or group of colleagues that they talked with on a regular basis or could call on if they had a question, none identified a formal network or support system that they were included in as a member. All were aware of such connections in their own districts but, they were not considered a part of the connections. Jasmine spoke of an experience that she had in her district when her former superintendent announced his retirement a couple of years prior to retiring. According to Jasmine, the current superintendent was then serving as associate superintendent. As soon as the superintendent announced his retirement, it was obvious to Jasmine that the outgoing superintendent had targeted the associate superintendent as his replacement. The superintendent made sure that during the next couple of years he provided the associate superintendent will all of the knowledge and experiences needed for him to step immediately

into the position with a seamless transition. Jasmine stated, “That didn’t happen for me. I was not part of that good old boy network.”

The disconnection from formal and even informal networks was viewed by the participants as a barrier to women in North Carolina ascending to the superintendency. Most of the women in the study did not know how many African American women superintendents we had in the state. Only one person knew the names of both of the women, and one participant could name one of the African American superintendents. None of the participants had any kind of professional contact or relationship with either of the African American female superintendents. Rhonda stated:

I don’t think African American women realize the value of a network. I think everyone is busy doing their own thing. We are so busy making sure that we have crossed every “T” and dotted every “I” in order to present quality work to our superiors, that we forget that we have to find time to promote ourselves. Networking I think is viewed more as socializing among African American women, something we just aren’t comfortable mixing with work. Perhaps we need to change our mindset.

One of the participants commented that they viewed professional networks as cliques and felt when African Americans separate themselves from the group, “we could be accused of discrimination, the one thing that we don’t want to happen to us.” According to Maria, “This is a political side that I don’t do well with. I was raised to believe that we are all people and we should work together not as separate groups.” While other participants viewed the inability of African American women to organize formal professional networks as the system’s way of keeping a group divided and defeated, they expressed the hope that African American women from across the state would somehow form a network to share ideas and

support each other. There was consensus among most of the participants that uniting and speaking in one voice would not only bring unity across the state, but would also foster a sense of empowerment among the group.

The participants made observations of their perceptions of African American women not being supportive of each other. One participant described her perception of the relationships between African American women as crabs in the bucket mentality. As soon as it appears that one is getting too close to the top, another will do something to pull them down. She asserted that this mentality can be linked back to slavery, when the systematic way of keeping the slaves defeated was to keep them separated. Brenda commented, “It’s hard to support someone you don’t know and as long as we are separate, we will never know each other.”

### Summary

Four success indicator themes and three barriers and challenges themes emerged from the interviews and data analysis of African American women’s perceptions of barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina. The success indicator themes of *ethics*, *influence*, *preparedness*, and *expectations*, along with the barrier and challenges themes of *oppression*, *selection*, and *disconnection* were identified and discussed.

*Ethics*, defined the participants’ values and beliefs systems, which were identified by each participant as essential to the way in which they chose to lead. Values and beliefs that promote care and respect, equity and justice, honesty and integrity and hard work were described as core values that were taught at an early age and that carried over into their professional lives. These core value systems were described by the participants as critical to and non-compromising in their leadership style.

*Influence* included the early life experiences that are attributed to having influenced the career trajectory of the participants. The participants identified early maternal influence as contributing to a belief that they could do anything that they had a desire to do. They felt that their early observations of strong mothers, who believed in them and encouraged them to be all that they could be, instilled an assurance that they could be successful in life. This theme involved more than the early influences of the mother, and included influences of other family members, early community role models, and early church experiences. Each of these influences was described as having had an effect on their decisions to enter the field of education, as well as helped them to develop leadership skills that are employed in their current professional positions and helped develop their core values and beliefs system.

*Expectations* examined the high standards and expectations of family and community members as well as self imposed high standards and expectations. The participants discussed how family and community standards of high achievement and acceptable behavior were a part of the culture they grew up in and also contributed to shaping their leadership skills. Some participants shared that even though parents never had an opportunity to attend college, and in some cases never finished high school, the expectation was that their children would have that opportunity. Other family members, including siblings, grandparents and extended family members, although it may not have been verbalized, shared an expectation that the participant would go to college and graduate. Expectations were not always spoken, but were almost always understood as how things would happen. Early experiences of having high standards and expectations set, according to the participants, have been maintained in their professional lives. They describe themselves as having very high standards and expectations of themselves and others in the work environment.

*Preparedness* addressed the formal education and career pathway experiences in which the participants have been involved. Each of the participants in the study held a doctoral degree or was enrolled in a doctoral program and held North Carolina certification at the superintendent level. Although the participants expressed that they had earned or were working towards the doctoral degree for personal achievement and satisfaction rather than professional gain, they felt that the first step to being eligible for employment as a superintendent required that they hold the proper credentials along with having adequate work experience.

The three barriers and challenges themes included *oppression*, *selection*, and *disconnection*. *Oppression* encompassed the institutional, societal and political barriers perceived by the participants to be challenges in ascending to the superintendency. The participants discussed issues of glass ceiling effect in the workplace, from pre-conceived ideas and thinking about what a woman's role should be in society, to blatant stereotyping of roles. There were discussions of sexism, racism and the double whammy impact as they effect African American women in leadership roles.

*Selection* addressed the hiring procedures of local boards of education. Participants shared their concerns with the present power given to local boards by legislation in the superintendent selection and hiring process. Issues related to unwritten employment rules, hidden agendas, and personal vendettas were discussed.

*Disconnection* addressed the lack of formal or informal networks and support systems for female African American school administrators in North Carolina. While all of the participants agreed with the literature that supported the value of support systems, they acknowledged that no such system existed in the state of North Carolina. There was

discussion as to whether or not African American women recognized the value of networks or support systems and how some viewed them as separatist groups or cliques that are not good for progress. Others viewed the lack of the network as a system or institution's way of keeping like minds apart.

The four major success indicators and the three major barriers and challenges themes provide insight into the lived experiences of African American district level administrators in ascending the a superintendent position. The following chapter discusses the themes in light of current literature on women leading school systems. There the study's research questions are addressed followed by suggested implications and ideas for further research.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this study was to identify perceived barriers and challenges for African American women in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina schools. A phenomenological research design was used to describe the perceptions and lived experiences of African American women in North Carolina who are currently employed as district level administrators. The lived experiences and perceptions of African American women were discussed in the context of relationship to constructing values and beliefs systems. The belief and value systems were discussed in the context of shaping and constructing leadership style and professional attitude. When viewed through the lens of Black feminist theory, the described lived experiences and perceived barriers and challenges provide understanding of how the intersection of sexism, racism and social class constructs impacts ascension of Black women to positions of power and control in North Carolina.

Jackson's (1999) success indicators identified by African American female superintendents, along with Alston's (1999) identified barriers and challenges encountered by Black women in ascending to the superintendency, provided the framework for this study. Four success indicator themes and three barrier and challenges themes emerged from the participant data. The four success indicator themes are *ethics, influences, expectations, and preparedness*. Twelve sub-themes emerged from the four major success indicator themes. The three barrier and challenges themes are *oppression, selection, and disconnection*. Seven sub-themes emerged from the three major barriers and challenges themes.

This chapter will provide an overview of the study, a discussion of the findings and recommendations from a Black feminist theory perspective. The discussion will center first on the themes and sub-themes. An additional section will be organized around the research questions. The implications for educational leadership preparation institutions and programs, along with implications for legislators and local boards of education and African American women are addressed and recommendations for further research presented.

### *Overview of Study*

The overarching construct informing this study is the phenomenological experience of very few African American progressing through the pipeline to the superintendency in North Carolina. Based on 2008 employment data, at least 20% of the high profile district leadership positions in North Carolina are filled with African American women. Yet only two of these women have been able to exit the pipeline to the superintendency (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2008). In particular this study qualitatively examined the general issue of the absence of proportional numbers of African American female superintendents in North Carolina public schools and why are they missing?

### *Discussion of Findings*

Jackson (1999) asked why the percentage of African American women across the nation who were serving as school superintendents had not increased in years before her study. In examining this phenomenon, Jackson interviewed women from across the states who had served as superintendents. The participants in that study identified four common themes as responsible for their success as superintendent. Jackson's identified themes were:

- 1) Women grew up with support that prepared them for leadership. They seized every opportunity to lead others;
- 2) Optimistic attitude;
- 3) Accepted a life in a *fish bowl* personal persona; and
- 4) Formal educational training, robust experiences in the field of education and strong community connections.

Alston (1999) conducted a study that examined why African American were not serving as superintendents. Like Jackson, she studied the responses of African American females who were or had served in the role of superintendent. The study participants ranked five factors as moderately to greatly constraining to their ascension. Alston's five major themes of barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency were:

- 1) Presence of good old boy network, support systems or sponsorships;
- 2) Lack of awareness of political maneuvers;
- 3) Lack of role models;
- 4) Societal attitudes that Blacks lack competency in leadership positions; and
- 5) No formal or informal method of identifying Black aspirants to administrative positions.

Themes elucidated through this study add to previous knowledge already provided in these earlier studies conducted by Jackson and Alston. Table 6 identifies the information derived from this study.

Table 6  
*Themes and Findings*

Concepts of Themes	Findings
A. Conceptual Framework Success Indicators  Emergent Success Indicator Themes	Success indicators were identified by Jackson (1999) as factors viewed as instrumental in their success in succeeding to the superintendency. This research study identified four themes that were discussed as indicators of success in the participant's current administrative role.
1. Ethics	Sub-Themes care and respect equity and justice honesty and integrity hard work
2. Influence	Sub-Themes maternal influences other Family Member influences role Models church experiences
3. Expectations	Sub-Themes external driving forces internal driving forces
4. Preparedness	Sub-Themes formal education, training and experiences career pathways
B. Conceptual Framework: Barriers and Challenges  Emergent Barriers and Challenges Themes	Barriers and challenges were identified by Alston (1999) as constraining to ascension to superintendent positions. This research study identified four themes discussed as barriers and challenges in ascending to a superintendent position in North Carolina.
1. Oppression	Sub-Themes institutional societal/cultural political
2. Selection	Sub-Themes hiring practices unwritten rules hidden agenda and vendettas
3. Disconnections	Sub-Theme absence of formal networks and support systems

*Emerged Themes*

Early research on African American female superintendents focused primarily on descriptions of women. Revere (1989) conducted an in-depth case study of African American women who had served as superintendents dating back to Velma Dolphin Ashley, superintendent of Boley Oklahoma school district from 1944-1956. Revere noted that the fact that Black female superintendents existed prior to 1956 was obscured in the literature. Later the literature primarily focused on women in leadership with a small sample of African American women within the larger context of women in school administration (Brunner, 1998). There still exists a gap in published research specifically about Black female superintendents or other women of color and research conducted on male superintendents. The lack of published research about black female superintendents is further evidence of their under-representation in the superintendency (Brunner, 1998). According to Jackson (1999), prior to 1995 the number of African American female superintendents never reached 50 in one year.

Other studies conducted on Black women focused on specific issues or problems. Little research had been conducted that examined the impact of the combination of race and gender on school administrators. Jackson's (1999) study updated Revere's (1987) study that provided a comprehensive history of African American female superintendents. Jackson's study was designed to hear from the voices of African American women experiences identified as contributing to their appointments as superintendent. Five themes emerged that were drawn from an analysis of data gathered through interviews with fourteen African American female superintendents and a focus group of twelve African American female superintendents. Jackson's five themes were used in the construction of the framework for

this research study. The four major themes emerging from this study, identified as success indicators, are discussed and linked to the literature on African American female superintendents. Success indicator themes identified from this study were: ethics, 2) influence, 3) expectations, and 4) preparedness. Discussion of each theme is linked to the literature as it deals with qualifications, experience, desired leadership skills, and professional practice for the superintendent position.

### *Success Indicators*

*Ethics* refers to the personal belief system as it relates to established values, morals and work habits viewed by the study participants as intrinsic values that are deemed important to effective leadership. Each of the participants felt that their personal belief system helped construct their leadership style. Four sub-themes emerged from the ethics major theme. The sub-themes were: 1) care and respect, 2) equity and justice, 3) honesty and integrity, and 4) hard work.

The participants' identification of personal belief systems linked to leadership styles support the findings of Gilligan (1986) that describe women's ways of leading as more affective than dictatorial and more centered around a system of core values and beliefs than concerned with rules and procedures. Gilligan provided insight into behavioral leadership skills, such as relationship leading and nurturing that are practiced more by women than men. Murtadha and Larson (1999), described African American women as compassionate nurturers who care more about individuals than policies. According to Dana and Bourisaw (2006), women are reared to be caring individuals who value relationships over power.

Each of the study participants attributed their style of leadership to early childhood rearing practices in their families. Principles of respect, honesty and equity were taught at an

early age and are described as still being a part of their core value systems that have had a long term personal and professional effect on them. Participants described themselves as able to walk the talk, visible and available to their stakeholders, caring, good listeners, trustworthy, collaborative and consensus building leaders, respectful and fair, without compromise. These descriptors are indicative of the participants' infusion of their value and belief systems into their leadership style.

Berman (1999) reported that women more than men are likely to interact with subordinates. Participants expressed their belief in equity and justice. One of their basic leadership tenets was to never ask anyone to do anything that they would not do themselves. Based on early learned values, their leadership style did not support class systems or structures of hierarchy, other than those established by board policy or requirements, within the workplace.

Neuse (1991), described different ways women conceptualize the purpose of their work as: 1) giving more attention to the importance of individual differences among people, 2) having more knowledge and understanding about curriculum, and 3) valuing the production of workers. Study participants' ethics of care, respect and hard work support Neuse's conceptualized work theory.

Williams and Willowers' (1983) study provided a description of the work philosophy of women superintendents that reinforced the work philosophies of participants in this study. Female superintendents were described as following a *Log Cabin Ethos* or a student come first philosophy. Log Cabin Ethos was used to encompass virtues traditionally valued by our society that included: 1) doing one's best, 2) being honest, 3) being fair, open, and 4) treating everyone equally. Participants described themselves as practicing Log Cabin Ethos

in their daily interactions with those they lead. Lisa succinctly states, “I do what I do for the kids. It is all about the children.”

This research provided a description of the leadership style utilized by African American women in district leadership positions. It also provided explanation of the link between early learned core values and present day leadership styles. When employers, particularly male employers, including search consultants and boards of education develop an understanding of *ethics* surrounding the actions of an African American female school leader and are able to embrace their difference in leadership style as being learned early, based on a set of core values and make up who they are as individuals, perhaps African American women will be afforded more opportunities to assessing superintendent positions in North Carolina.

*Influences* focus on the socio-cultural and early school, family and church experiences that are identified as having helped shape the self-concept of these female leaders. Four sub-themes emerged from the major theme of Influences. The sub-themes are identified as 1) maternal influence, 2) other family and community influence, 3) early role models and 4) early church activities and experiences. Peterkin (2000), formerly of Howard University, reported that most people, including boards of education members, do not understand and have a hard time dealing with confident, strong willed and outspoken African American women. According to Peterkin, the problem with understanding these females begins with social stereotypes about women in general. Secondly, the inability to understand the personality of an African American woman has more to do with a lack of understanding the effect of socio-cultural and early life influences in shaping the personality that intersects with the leadership style rather than the behavior itself. Study participants’ stories provided a

direct link to early influences that they identified as having an impact on many of their life choices, including career choices. Subjects identified strong maternal influence, other family member influence, community role models and early church experiences influences that provided them with experiences that helped them develop confidence and high self esteem.

McCray, Kilgore, and Neal (2002) found socio-cultural and school related factors that influenced African American women's perspective of the teaching profession. An important observation by McCray et al. was that, the study participants' perceptions of teaching were shaped by their perspectives on culturally responsive mothering. The women in their study described powerful and complex relationships with their mothers as significant and necessary in shaping their views of the profession of teaching. Participants in this study describe powerful and in-charge mothers who served as early role models for their daughters. Most of the participants concluded that their mothers' attitudes and relationships with them, helped instill self reliant and independent behavior in them.

Early school experiences and teacher interactions were identified by the study participants as having helped them develop a love for the teaching profession and helping others. Research on women's ways of leading support the participants' description of themselves as leading by nurturing. Most of the participants identified a teacher who helped cultivate the love of learning and the love of helping others. Lisa recalled how her first grade teacher, in a segregated setting, would let her help the others students, once her assignments were completed. She shared how much she loved her first grade teacher and how much she wanted to be just like her. Lisa's love for helping and nurturing carried over into her adult leadership style. When asked what other profession they could see themselves in if they

were not educators, the majority of the participants named another service profession such as social work or nursing.

Supportive family members were identified as having influence on the character development of the participants. Family members who were teachers or who were most often first generation college graduates themselves, were described as influencing the participants to excel in school and in several cases, it was these influences that helped them make the decision to select education as a profession.

Generally the role of the mentor was that of supporter, guide, protector and advocate (Enomoto, Gardiner & Grogan, 2000). Early role modes were identified as easy to find while growing up. Study participants described early role models as teachers, community leaders, parents and grandparents. The participants all agreed that role models were seen as active, contributing members in the communities where they lived. Teachers lived in the same neighborhoods and doctors, community leaders went to church with them. Early role modes were identified as male and female and all of the early role models were described as African American. According to the study participants, early influences, guidance and direction provided by mentors, were identified as having influence on their leadership style.

The church was identified by the participants as providing opportunities to the participants to development leadership, public speaking, organizational and coordinating skills. The African American church is described as the focal point or HUB within the African American community. McCray et al. (2002) described an African American church as an important component of socialization regarding the connection between church activities and personal growth and development. Participants remembered how early opportunities to be involved in church activities as public speakers or leaders of youth

groups, helped to develop skills that have been transferred into their leadership style that in turn helped them build confidence, public speaking skills and leadership experience.

*Expectations* refer to high standards and expectations for excellence imposed by parents, family members, community members, including high self-imposed standards and expectation. These standards and expectations are described as standards of doing well; being successful and a prospect of good things will come (Wright & Tuska, 1965).

Two sub-themes emerged from the major theme of expectation. These two sub-themes are identified as: 1) external driving forces and 2) internal driving forces. Internal driving forces were identified as expectations of success and excellence and high achievement from parents, other family members, and community. External driving forces were identified as personal expectations of excellence and success.

Several participants discussed how being the child of parents who were not afforded an opportunity to complete high school or attend college; they felt that they were held to high standards and expectations by their parents, family members and the community as a whole. They described their parents as knowing and appreciating the value of a good education. They recalled that excellence was not an option in their parent's home. High expectations were understood more than verbalized as revealed by Victoria who said, "No one ever told me that I was going to college. We never discussed it. It was just an expectation." Childhood experiences of family standards and expectations for behavior and achievement is a basic factor in future occupational choices of children (Wright & Tuska, 1965). Important adults, particularly parents influence the careers that people pursue (Wright & Tuska, 1965).

Study participants recalled the sacrifices parents made, often with limited resources, so that their children would have opportunities that they never had. The expectation of their

parents was that they would take full advantage of the opportunities afforded them.

According to the participants, a reward to their parents was to live up to the high expectations and standards. Living up to the standards and expectations was identified as doing well in school, making good grades, finishing high school, graduating from college and lastly finding a job in their chosen profession.

Living up to internal driving forces of high standards and expectations was identified as a way of life by the participants. They describe themselves as wanting to be at the top, wanting to shine, pushing themselves and being determined. When characteristics of confidence, determination and assertiveness are incorporated into the leadership style of men, they are viewed as positive assets. When these same traits are utilized by women they are viewed as bossy, irrational and too hard to work [with]. Danielle sums it up when she states, “What works for men, won’t work for women.”

*Preparedness* focuses on the formal educational training and robust experiences of the study participants. According to Brunner and Grogan (2007) 85% of women serving as building and district level administrators, were certified as superintendents in their state. Sixty-one percent of the same group held doctorate degrees in educational leadership. Seven or 70% of the study participants in this study held doctorate degrees in school administration and three were enrolled in doctoral programs.

Earning a doctorate degree was viewed by several participants as more of a personal challenge and accomplishment than a professional necessity. There were other participants who saw the doctoral degree as a stepping stone to other professional opportunities, not limited to the superintendency. Several participants stated they did plan to apply for a

superintendent position sometime in the near future and felt the certification would be an asset. Each participant either held or was eligible to hold superintendent certification.

The question of whether or not participants are qualified based on credentials is still not the issue. Career pathways and administrative experiences are identified in the literature as important to the ascension of women into superintendency. The traditional career path for a superintendent is described as having five steps. These steps are identified as:

- 1) teaching experience;
- 2) assistant principal;
- 3) principal;
- 4) district/central office position (director, assistant or associate superintendent); and
- 5) superintendent.

This pathway may be abbreviated sometimes by the absence of one or more of the steps along the path or it may be altered by adding steps such as coordinator or facilitator to the pathway (Hays, 2001).

Hays identified three steps along that pathway that are considered essential to preparation for the superintendency.

- 1) Teaching long enough to fully understand how to develop effective curricula and deliver effective instruction.

Study participants spent an average of 8.5 years in the classroom as teachers before moving into administration. Their philosophical opinions of tenure in the classroom support Hays' first recommendation for essential preparation for the superintendency. Participants expressed a desire to master the skill of teaching in order to have credibility with teachers they would be responsible for leading.

- 2) Opportunities to participate on committees and task forces and other administrative activities, including serving as chair of these bodies in order to practice and demonstrate leadership skills.

All of the participants in the study reported having been provided opportunities by supervisors to participate in activities that afforded them opportunities to demonstrate leadership skills.

- 3) Contribute to community by participating in one or more activities that open up opportunities to demonstrate leadership abilities within the larger community.

Several participants reported involvement in local community and civic organizations and professional organizations. Involvement in professional organizations was described as primarily passive involvement as a member only. One participant had been involved professionally at the state level, serving in various leadership roles. One participant reported that she was involved in local politics for several years and served as an elected official for five of those years. Other participants shared that while they understood the benefit of organization and community involvement, time constraints of job related responsibilities coupled with family obligations restricted active participation for them.

Based on the formal educational training of this study's participants, career pathway advancements and leadership opportunities beyond school administration, support that women in this study are prepared through training and experience for the superintendency.

#### *Barriers and Challenges Factors*

Alston's (1999) study identified constraint and facilitators factors that Black female superintendents encountered in route to the superintendency. Alston used a four-part questionnaire to solicit data pertaining to personal characteristics, issues effecting

superintendents, identification of constraints and facilitators encountered in route to the superintendency and perceptions of the superintendency. Five factors were ranked as being moderately or greatly constraining in their ascension to the superintendency. The five factors were:

- 1) Presence of “good old boy network”, support systems and sponsorships;
- 2) Lack of awareness of political maneuvers;
- 3) Lack of role models;
- 4) Societal attitudes that Black people lack competency in leadership positions; and
- 5) No formal or informal method for identifying Black aspirants to administrative positions.

Alston’s five themes of constraints and facilitators were used in the construction of the framework of this study. Four major themes emerging from this study, identified as barriers and challenges, are discussed and linked to the literature on African American female superintendents, institutional barriers, socio-cultural and political constructs as they relate to female leadership expectations. Four barrier and challenges themes identified in this study were: 1) oppression, 2) perception, 3) selection, and 4) disconnection. Discussion of each theme is linked to the literature as it addresses barriers and challenges of women in leadership positions.

*Oppression* focuses on institutional, societal and political barriers and challenges experienced or identified by the study participants. Three sub-themes emerged from the major oppression theme. The three sub-themes were: 1) institutional structures and practices, 2) societal and cultural perceptions, and 3) political clout. These sub-themes were identified

by the participants as barriers and challenges to ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina.

Dana and Bourisaw (2006) identified institutional barriers as glass walls and ceilings that have been systematically constructed as a consequence of our cultural attitudes, behaviors and practices. Meyerson (2004) in identifying structures that limit female progression in the workplace, pointed out that it is not just the ceiling that is holding women back, it is the whole structure of organizations in which women work, including the foundation, beams, walls and the air that impede advancement of women in the workplace. In spite of state and federal legislation enacted to prevent discriminatory practices in the work place, particularly against women, structures continue to exist that impede the progress of women and minorities. These barriers and structures that impede progression of the African American female have been described as glass only if the woman on the other side of the ceiling is white (Alston, 1999). Alston, Jackson (1999), and Ortiz (1999) refer to the ceiling for the woman of color as a concrete barrier.

Institutional barriers or glass ceilings impeding ascension to the superintendency identified by this study's participants, included structures that limit access to secondary principal assignments and other district level positions that have been identified as part of the natural pathway to the superintendency. Shakeshaft (1989) pointed out that superintendent search firms and boards of education value candidates with secondary administrative experience over those with elementary experience. A general belief among superintendent search and selection committees and boards of education is that the high school principal experience is more rigorous than elementary experience (Tallerico, 2000). According to Tallerico, high school principals are described as having a high level of visibility, often

greater than the superintendent. The high school principal is well known and is seen at events with high community participation such as athletics, music concerts and graduation ceremonies. Successful secondary principals are described as having strong management and administrative skills. They are celebrated as heroes if one of their sports teams wins a state title or warriors if they survive a difficult situation such as school violence. Although there has been an increase in the number of women serving as school superintendents in the last decade, (Glass & Franceschini, 2007), the majority of the high school principal positions are being held by men. Participants in this study had limited experience with secondary experience. Only one of the program study participants had high school principal experience. Two had been high school assistant principals.

The institutional structure of school administration has women serving predominately as elementary principals, curriculum coordinators or staff development coordinators (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999). Elementary principals operate below the radar screen in most school districts. Seven of the ten study participants had experience at the elementary level exclusively as either assistant principal or assistant principal. In addition to high school experience, past experience as a superintendent is also desirable among search and selection committees and boards education (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999).

Women are less likely to have had experience as a superintendent at the same age that men are applying for their second or third assignment as superintendent. Affirmative action is out of favor in contemporary society, leaving the less experienced, minority candidates at the bottom of the applicants' stack. Even though the African American female is well prepared, has the proper and required credentials and is experienced as an administrator, she has not been afforded an opportunity to acquire experience in the areas deemed critical to

superintendent success. The constructed institutional barrier that supports male dominance as high school principal contributed to a lack of access to preferred administrative positions.

Societal and cultural barriers emerged as a sub-theme from the major theme of oppression. Societal barriers are defined as cultural and societal norms and mental models that are taught and conditioned in childhood and reinforced throughout adulthood (Skrla, 2003). Societal or cultural norms define within a society or culture, generally by gender, who is expected to do what. Societal barriers identify accepted norms and things within a group of people that are shared or held in common (Guba, 1990). Schein (1992) points out that insight into the culture of a community may be accessed from common gathering locations within a community. Factual reports, rumors and hear say contribute to the attitudes, behavior, language and traditions that exists and are valued in a culture. According to Schein, it is difficult for those who have been conditioned to societal or cultural norms within their communities to accept cross-over or movement in and out of the accepted cultural norms by those who don't fit the mental model. Societal barriers in this study are identified as gender and race.

The social role theory proposed by Eagly (1987) claims that men and women behave differently in social situations and take different roles due to the expectations that society has about them. In the case of school leadership, men, historically steer away from careers in elementary education because historically and culturally elementary education has not been perceived by society as a male profession. On the other hand, women steer clear of high school principalships because historically and culturally secondary education leadership has not been perceived by society as a female position.

Much of the literature on educational management and theories of management and organization ignores women, either by making the assumption that managers are male or by assuming a gender-free position (Skrla, 2003). Some of the literature that examines the social construction of the superintendency indicates that being female increases the difficulty of overcoming barriers to attain the superintendency (Brunner, 1999). Dana and Bourisaw (2006) claim that when women behave in a stereotypical female manner they are not viewed as having the strength, financial knowledge, and competencies that men possess. Women are viewed culturally as emotional while men are considered rationale. Women are considered soft leaders; men are described as strong leaders. Women gossip; men talk. Women suggest; men direct. Bardwick and Douvan (1971) explain that socially constructed feminine expectations include “dependence, passivity, fragility, low pain tolerance, nonaggression, non-competitiveness, inner orientation, interpersonal orientation, empathy, sensitivity, nurturance, subjectivity, receptivity, inability to risk, emotional liability and supportiveness” (p. 147). Skrla (2000) explains that the norms associated with the superintendency are constructed with the assumption that males will occupy this position. These norms are explained in terms opposite from those used to describe feminine expectations. According to Skrla, these terms include independence, assertiveness, sturdiness, high pain tolerance, aggression, competitiveness, career orientation, self-sufficiency, stoicism, justice, objectivity, unyieldingness, remoteness, risk taking, and rationality. Societal expectations are that women are the homemakers and men are the bread winners (Skrla, 2000). Participants in the study spoke of the expectation that they thought was placed on them by society. Nine of the ten participants described the superintendent position within their districts as being a male dominated role. One participant had a female superintendent and felt that the

community was open to a female although she felt it would be hard for another female to be named superintendent there. She did not view the obstacle based on anything the current superintendent had or had not done, but solely on district perceptions that a man would probably be the best for the job. Even though she planned to apply for the position when the current superintendent retired or resigned, she felt the next person selected as superintendent would be male.

Women superintendents are expected to adopt practices and behaviors in compliance with socially constructed normative behaviors. Women who adopt masculine attributes are then described as harsh, difficult and trying too hard to be a man. On the other hand, women whose leadership style is collaborative, cooperative and caring are viewed as weak and ineffective (Shakeshaft, 1987). Women speak of being viewed differently from their male counterparts when having to make difficult decisions. Yvette shared her story about her first principalship at a middle school. Her faculty expected her to make the hard calls, and she did. But when she made a call that was not favorable to her staff, she was described as the *b-word*.

Participants also felt that they were not respected as a professional, feeling on most occasions disregarded by their male peers. They felt that their opinions and suggestions were often overlooked or not valued by male colleagues. Lisa shared the impression she gathered about male respect for female ideas from her experience in attending regional superintendent meetings for her superintendents. During these meetings she observed male colleagues engage in conversations that did not include the females present. Recognizing that she was a representative for her superintendent, she was careful to not speak during the meetings, unless asked a direct question. In reflection of that experience, she felt that her decision to

remain quiet was based more on a decision to not be ignored or minimized during the meeting and the best way to make that happen was by remaining quiet during the meeting.

The proposition that women are not interested in the superintendency is refuted and that the pathway to the superintendency is open to all qualified, certified applicants is not accurate (Glass & Franceschi, 2007). Only one participant in this study communicated that she was in no way interested in ever applying for a superintendency. Other participants made statements such as *when I apply for a superintendency* or *I plan to apply for a superintendency*. All participants shared concerns with the constraints encountered in route to the superintendency that limited their ability to enter the position of superintendent due to the societal expectations of women versus men in the position.

Shared ways of thinking and common mental models guide the thinking and understanding of the group according to Schein (1992). Historically in the United States the mental model for leadership is male. Based on data in North Carolina, the mental model for the school superintendent is white male. Some districts try to cross-over or move in and out of the accepted cultural norms for their communities, resulting in dissatisfaction with the person and not the quality of work of the person. Monique summed it up well when she said, “No matter what I do, I cannot change the mindset of people within the community.”

Each of the study participants identified the effects of “double whammy” as a barrier that limits access to the superintendency for African American women. Andrews and Simpson-Taylor (1995) identified double whammy as one of the biggest barriers faced in the workplace by African American women. Double whammy is described as negative race and gender based stereotypes that create workplace problems for women of color, especially as they relate to issues of job promotion and advancement (Andrews & Simpson-Taylor, 1995).

Brenda summed up the sentiments of the study participants when she stated, “We are slapped on either side, some will have issues because we are female, others will have issues with us because we are women and then there’s the group that will have issues with us because we are who we are, black female leaders.” Pigford and Tannsen (1993) noted that society socializes Black women to be second-class citizens because of both race and gender. Participants made reference to the impact they felt race and gender had on their experiences as administrators. This impact was referred to by six participants as the double whammy. Double whammy or double bind theory has been identified as discrimination based on race *and* gender (Ladner, 1971). For this reason, African American women feel that they are systemically oppressed in their quests to become administrators. When looking at areas of privilege, white and male, Black women are not present on this chart at all. White males are included in both areas of privilege, White and male. White women are included as privilege under the category of white. The Black male is included as privileged in the male category. The Black woman does not have a place of privilege in our society. Shakeshaft (1987) points out that even though Blacks as a group face significant discrimination in the administrative area, Black women face more, for no other reason than being female and Black.

The third sub-theme to emerge from the theme of oppression was political clout. Superintendents have little control over the external and internal forces that invade their territories (Grogan, 2000a). Johnson (1996) argued that the social and political environment in which schools operate is turbulent because “schools are not freestanding, self sufficient organizations” (p. 273). Guban (1988) noted that conflict in the superintendency has stemmed from organizational politics. The superintendent is positioned between what state and local boards of education want; what parents expect; what teachers and principals want;

and what the student needs. He concluded that the school superintendent lives in constant conflict.

Women's ways of leading and the identified core values and belief system, woven into the leadership style of the African American female supports why politics is viewed as a barrier to African American females ascending to the superintendency. All of the participants in the study identified equity and justice as important factors that impact how they lead and instrumental in development of their leadership style.

*Selection* refers to practices implemented in screening, selecting and employing superintendents. Three sub-themes emerged from the selection theme. The sub-themes of 1) hiring practices of boards of education, 2) unwritten employment rules, and 3) hidden agendas and personal vendettas were identified by participants as barriers for African American women ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina schools.

Tallerico (2000) described institutional and organizational structures that created gates and barriers for women desiring top administrative roles. Her study examined issues related to gaining access to the superintendency and advanced an understanding of a complex mix of the spoken and unspoken selection criteria used in the selection of superintendents. Governing boards who hire superintendents have allowed negative stereotypes and socio-cultural constructs of women and African Americans to influence their decisions about non-traditional superintendent applicants. Rusher (1996) reports that stereotypical attitudes present challenges for the African American female school administrator because she has not been viewed as a key decision maker, but more as a doer or hands-on-worker, which links to the ethic of hard work.

Participants in this study expressed concern for the superintendent selection process as it is currently established and practiced. North Carolina General Statute outlines the responsibility of boards of education in hiring the superintendent. Although the responsibility for hiring the superintendent is given to local boards of education, the process for how this should be accomplished is not outlined. Non-transparent processes are implemented by many school districts across the state according to the participants. They felt that the current process was not fair or equitable because it gives too much authority to boards of education to select superintendents. Tallerico (2000) described the screening of applicants for superintendent positions as a gate keeping approach utilized by boards of education and search firms to narrow the applicant candidate pool. According to Tallerico, these screens are often gender structured and quite difficult for the female applicant to circumvent. Monique who had applied twice for a superintendent position shared that during her application process, she received notice of an interview from the attorney employed to conduct the initial search. Following the interview, she never received notice of the status of her application. She only found out that the candidates' pool had been reduced to three, when she read about it in the newspaper. The paper announced a second round of interviews scheduled within a couple of days, so she assumed she had not made the final cut. Monique had to call the attorney to make sure that she was not included in the second round of interviews. Monique described this experience as very unprofessional on the part of the selection committee and very demeaning to her personally.

Participants in this study cited concerns with districts boards of education not including input or participation from other members of the community in the selection. One discussed how her superintendent announced his retirement two years in advance so that he

would have opportunity to select and train his successor. One discussed how a survey conducted to seek input from the public relative to what the community wanted in the next superintendent was disregarded and not used in the selection process, because the board did not like the information provided in the survey. Another candidate stated how constituents are totally eliminated from the process in some districts. Interviews are held in secret and community members do not know who is advancing through the process until the board is ready to announce the next superintendent. Monique discussed a school district that she felt used a process that is transparent to the community and applicants. According to Monique, in some districts finalists for the superintendency are presented in open forum to the community. Community members are able to meet finalists and be involved in a public forum sometimes asking questions or at least having the opportunity to listen to responses to questions developed prior to the forum. Publicly boards communicate to communities that they are not able to recruit qualified female or minority applicants. Study participants felt that a more transparent selection process that can be governed by an outside agency would level the playing field for all applicants.

Tallerico (2000) identified other practices that impede the selection of women, particularly African American women as superintendent in public schools. These practices include spoken and unspoken criteria and rules that influence the process of superintendent selection. The spoken rules were identified by the participants as superintendent vacancy postings, and job descriptions. These were identified as public information. Study participants felt that there are far more hidden rules for selection, that neither those applying for the position or the general public and sometimes certain members of the board are aware exist. Traditions and practices generally include unspoken views or criteria on the leadership

within that community. Local boards of education often have unwritten and never discussed expectations for the position of school superintendent. These expectations are based on community and personal perceptions and are shared ideas about who would be best received into the community as a leader. The term the *right fit* would best describe what happens when selection committees or boards of education attempt to select a community leader like a superintendent based on community tradition and acceptance.

Board make up was another factor in the selection process that was identified by in the literature and described by the participants as a possible barrier in ascending to the superintendency. According to Shakeshaft (1987), it is essential to have board members who can see the big picture. If members are narrowly focused, unwilling to take risks or go against the cultural grain, things will not change. Participants had not observed communities receptive to any female as the head of the school system. Historically, the superintendents employed in the school districts represented by the study participants were male, with the exception of two districts. One district had employed a White female as superintendent, but replaced her with a White male when she retired several years ago. The other district currently has a White female as superintendent. Participants were doubtful that their districts were ready to embrace a woman, not to mention an African American woman as the head of the education system. There were statements such as, “I don’t think they are ready to embrace Black leadership,” “they do not want a Black woman telling them what to do, and it’s a cultural thing.”

Participants felt that too many board members are self serving. It is about self and personal gain and district needs are lost in personal agendas. According to the study participants, it was obvious that some board members seek a position on the board of

education to carry out personal agendas or vendettas. Monique, the only participant in this study to apply for a superintendency twice, spoke about personal vendettas some of the members of the board of education had against her. One situation involved a board member who had held a grudge against her since they were in high school together. The board member made public comments that Monique had a bad attitude in high school and there was no way he/she could support her for superintendent. Another issue that was identified by a board member involved an incident between Monique's daughter and the daughter one of the board members. Her daughter and the daughter of the board member had an altercation at school that resulted in an out of school suspension for both girls. The board member blamed Monique's daughter and made statements to community leaders that Monique would never serve as superintendent in that district as long as she was on the board in that district.

*Disconnection* addresses the lack of formal or informal networks and support systems for female African American school administrators in North Carolina. Catalyst's (2008) research on women's success in the work place is based in part on access to formal and informal networks. Networks that can provide important information are identified as one of the primary barriers for women of color (Catalyst, 2008). Shakeshaft (1987) notes that there is no underestimating the importance of mentors and sponsors for personnel aspiring to leadership positions in school administration. The lack of networking opportunities coupled with the scarcity of positive role models and adequate sponsorships and mentoring among women are cited as major barriers to women's career advancement in educational administration. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) recognized that there are goals that may not be achieved by certain segments of the human population because of systematic barriers that are fostered by those who are leading. Participants in the study identified individuals they

described as professional mentors or role models. Six of the women identified a White male as their professional mentor or role model. These individuals were described as the first principal they worked for or a superintendent. Three participants identified females, two White and one Black female as their mentors. One participant could not identify a professional mentor. Those who identified mentors explained that their mentors were instrumental in helping them gain access to work experience within their current jobs and often provided encouragement to them to move into principalships or central office positions. None of the participants mentioned that they were encouraged by their mentor to apply for a superintendent position. Without assistance and support from others, the systematic barriers prevent some of the population from reaching goals and ambitions and injustice is the result (Brunner, 2002).

Culturally, men have been supported by constituents in bias ways (Catalyst, 2004). In general people support that which is familiar or known to them. African American women report an exclusion from networks or support systems. Allen & Jacobson (1997) in a study of African American women and their relationship with mentors and sponsors pointed out that older administrator select prospective protégés for grooming as leaders that are replicates of themselves. White men tend to promote other White men.

Participants in the study identified social connections, but could not identify a formal or informal network with which they had connections. The social connections identified by the participants, did not involve formal or informal meetings or opportunities for discussing specific matters or critical issues. There were no plans of action developed as a result of any information that may have been shared or discussed within these social connections. The participants described their social connections as a group of colleagues that could be called in

the event one had a question or needed assistance with a work assignment. Events were identified as shopping and luncheon or dinner trips between the colleagues. An opportunity or plan to build capacity within this established group by inviting others into the group was not discussed as part of the group's short-range or long-range plans. These types of groups are not described as having established enough momentum as a group in order to influence policy and decisions.

The participants in the study viewed the need for networks and support systems as important. The general consensus of the group was that a united front, with a single voice would be an excellent way to bring recognition to a group of under represented administrators in North Carolina schools. Men have the usual *good old boy* network to assist them in employment advancement, but women have very little collective professional support. Women complain that there is little time to do anything outside of all that is already done with family, work, church and personal education goals (Ah Ne-Beham & Cooper, 1998). Participants in this study recognized the importance and benefit of networks and support systems, but also recognize that women, particularly African American women do not have these established networks and support systems. Several study participants shared the sentiment that it is an intentional systematic ploy to keep a group of people divided in order to conqueror them. They felt that when a group of disenfranchised people unite and speak with one voice, there is empowerment within the group. Yvette shared that in her opinion, Black women were not as supportive of one another as they should be. The participants questioned whether or not African American women realized the value of a network. There was another question as to whether networking was viewed more as a social connection and most African American women are not comfortable mixing work with social

activity. The discussion of the participants also focused on networks or support systems primarily for African American women being viewed by the general population as discriminatory practice. Jasmine commented,

We allow others to make our things appear to be separate when they have their powerful networks in tack everyday. They have country clubs, city clubs, and golf clubs, all of the things that separate them from us. These are places where powerful, life changing decisions are made. If two or more of us gather for lunch, they want to know what we are up to. But on the other hand, they play golf with community leaders, board members and county commissioners, and we are expected to believe that it is just a game of golf.

The participants agreed that they stayed away from being involved in activities that were just for African Americans, women, or both because they did not want to be viewed as separatist. According to the participants, this mindset has done a lot to divide women or African Americans or African American women professionally and keep us apart. Several participants felt that the desire to not appear discriminatory or as a separatist, has assisted keeping Black women away from each other in North Carolina schools. Only one of the ten participants could name the two African American female superintendents in North Carolina and knew what districts they served. One participant knew the name of one but had her district incorrect. The other participants did not know prior to this study the number of superintendents, their names or the districts they served. Those who were unaware of the number of African American superintendents were surprised and disappointed to learn that there were only two African American female superintendents in the entire state during

2008-2009 school year. This discussion of the themes of the study has addressed the overarching research question and two secondary research questions.

From this discussion of the emergent themes, I will now move to a recapitulation of the research questions.

*Question 1: Why are there so few African American women ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools?*

The pathway or pipeline to the superintendency is identified as having distinct experiences, referred to as steps along the pathway to the final destination of superintendency. Figure 2 is a visual representation of the traditional pathway to the superintendency.

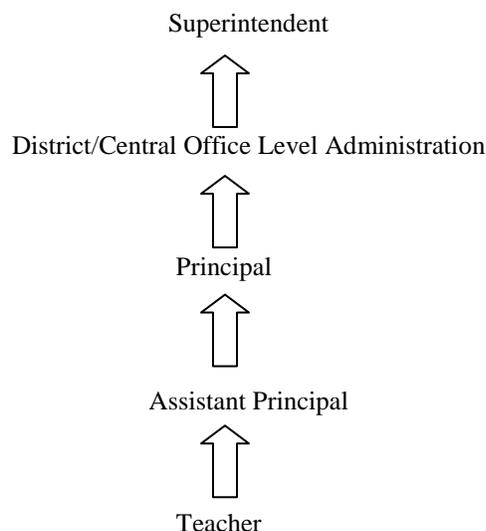


Figure 2. Traditional pathway to the superintendency.

The ability to identify and locate ten African American female district level school administrators, in ten different school systems in North Carolina provided documentation that highly qualified African American female school administrators do exist in this state. These women who are identified as existing in the pipeline or on the pathway to the

superintendency negates the explanation used by school systems in explaining the lack of ability to find qualified minority candidates for the position of superintendent.

While African American district administrators can be found in many of the districts across North Carolina, based on 2008-2009 employment data (Department of Public Instruction, 2009), there are still districts in the state of North Carolina that report no African American employees, in any capacity within the school district. Several participants within the study expressed concern for geographical areas that lacked a minority presence. They expressed a lack of desire to apply in such areas due to a feeling of not being wanted or welcomed in those districts. Geographical location within the state has the potential to contribute to a gap in the number of African American women serving as superintendents in the state. Based on state data, more African American women are employed in large, urban school districts in the eastern part of the state. There are few to no African American female administrators serving districts in far western or northwestern counties in North Carolina. The majority of the participants in this study were from school districts with school populations of more than 10,000 students and 1,000 employees. When geographical locations identified by the study participants as not being desirable in seeking superintendencies in North Carolina are eliminated, the number of potential opportunities to serve as superintendent in the state reduces from 115 opportunities to 82 opportunities for this population.

Considering available statistical information on the number of African American females in North Carolina who are in the pipeline to the superintendency and the fact that there are only two African American women who have ascended the pipeline to become superintendents in 2008-2009, this study addressed the first secondary research question

through an examination of early life experiences that helped shape and identify the leadership style of the participants, along with formal educational training and job related experiences. By unraveling threads of institutional, social, and cultural constructs identified by the participants as barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency, this study provided voice to African American female school leaders as they described barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency, added to the limited research on African American women in school leadership roles and provided what I hope will be a beginning to non-existent research on female African American public school administrators in North Carolina..

Participants linked their strong personal belief systems directly to how they identify themselves as leaders. These styles were described as centering on a system of core values and beliefs that are more concerned with the care of people than with rules and procedures. Societal and cultural constructs create mental norms for a desired leadership style of a top school system administrator. These constructs are based on gender structuring or stereotypical behavior which identifies what is acceptable ways of leading for men and women. The mental model norms established for the role of school superintendent are based on cultural and societal mental norms for male leadership. Ironically when a woman utilizes these same leadership skills in her day to day leadership style she is viewed as harsh, non-feminine and socially unacceptable, societal, and cultural mental models that are linked to gender. When African American females, who are challenged with the double whammy of gender and race, present themselves as confident and assertive, utilizing the socially constructed mental model of the desired school superintendent, they are described as loud, uncooperative, too ethnic, and/or disrespectful in addition to being harsh, non-feminine, and

socially unacceptable. These descriptions are linked not only to gender mental models but also to racial mental models and stereotypical descriptions. Community traditions and expectations were described as having greater influence over the selection of a candidate for the superintendency than did leadership style, educational training, and preparation or past job related experiences.

Participants identified the institutional barrier of selection and hiring processes and procedures as a possible explanation of why there are so few African American women serving as superintendents in North Carolina schools. Boards of education that have legislative directed responsibility for hiring the superintendent were described by participants as allowing negative stereotypical mental models of African American women influence their decisions about who accesses the superintendency in their districts. Some counties within this state have strong traditional beliefs that continue to marginalize populations of people based not only on gender but also on race. African American women once again are hit with the double slap in the face. Communities that find it hard to accept women in key leadership positions, find it even more difficult to embrace the idea of an African American woman serving in these roles. Boards of education are made up of representatives from communities whose belief systems and ideals are a reflection of the communities they represent. Boards and selection committees are described as sometimes made up of individuals who are unable or unwilling to see the big picture, unable to look beyond traditional practices in order to consider anything or anyone outside of the norm within that community. Board members were described as narrowly focused and unwilling to take risks or step outside of the cultural mental model box.

Participants also described boards of education members as self-serving, holding grudges and having personal agendas. Some members were described as seeing election or appointment to the board of education for the purpose of personal gain. According to the participants, some board members have personal agendas that they want to move and many times the result of their action is not in the best interest of students or the community. One participant shared her personal experiences in applying twice for the superintendent position in her school district. Comments from board members relative to their non-support of her as a candidate for the position were made publicly. She felt that these sentiments had nothing to do with her leadership ability or capability, but all to do with things that had either happened years ago when she was in high school or between her child and a board member's child. Monique expressed complete disappointment in elected officials who were unable to rise above immature thinking and personal feelings. She felt that her work should have spoken for her. She had been employed in the district for 28 years, served as the Associate Superintendent, was very supportive of the board and the superintendent, held all of the required credentials and yet she was not selected because of personal rather than professional opinions of elected officials.

A third reason why there are so few African American women ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina schools may be attributed to the lack of networks and support systems for African American women. A few of the participants identified informal social/professional networks with other African American female colleagues. These networks were described as resources for answers to professional questions as they related directly to work assignments. In some instances, the connections were identified as social only, with the women gathering on occasion to shop or share a meal.

Networks and support systems were viewed by the participants as critical to professional advancement. Although the participants were able to identify people they considered professional mentors, neither of the participants identified a formal network connection. The disconnection to professional networks and support systems were identified by the participants as a barrier encountered in route to the superintendency. None of the participants reported that they had been encouraged by those identified as mentors to pursue a superintendent position, nor had they been formally introduced to other colleagues by their mentors as up and coming superintendents. It could be assumed that African American females are not aggressively pursuing superintendent positions based on the number of participants in this study who had actually applied for a superintendent position. Only one of the ten participants in this study had ever applied for the position.

Although aware of various networks and support systems in place in their districts, they do not consider themselves a part of these systems. The participants identified these groups as the good old boy network. One participant shared an incident in her district when her former superintendent announced his retirement two years prior to the actual retirement date. He then spent those two years training and equipping the associate superintendent (a White male) with things he would need to know as superintendent. The former superintendent had already selected the person he felt should be the next superintendent and he spent time preparing him to move into that role. The participant said she was never considered for the position. Networks, sponsors and support systems select individuals to sponsor or support who most closely resemble themselves. Men almost always sponsor other men and White sponsors almost always sponsor other White people. The African American female, who does not hold membership in either privilege group, White or male, is once

again excluded from opportunity and access to networks of influence and support based solely on gender and race.

Three major themes of barriers and challenges emerged from this study. These themes were identified as *oppression*, *selection*, and *disconnection*. By definition, barrier refers to anything that prevents entrance, obstructs passage, retards progress or demarcates. These emerged themes will be discussed in the context of how they are viewed, from a Black feminist perspective, in limiting access to the superintendency for African American women.

Oppression focuses on institutional, societal and political barriers and challenges experienced or identified by the study participants as barriers to ascending to the superintendency. Institutional practices such as structuring of glass ceiling and other barriers have been identified as organizational oppression. Institutions enforce practices that are discriminatory and make it difficult for women to ascend to executive and top level positions within the organization. The public school superintendent position has been identified as one of the most male dominated positions in society.

One of the most obvious institutional barriers in public school administration is unequal access to a high school principalship. Women are in full control of making sure that the playing field is equal when it comes to credentials and training required for the position. All of the women in this study either had earned or were enrolled in doctoral degree programs. All of them held a North Carolina superintendent licenses issued by the Department of Public Instruction. All of them had pretty much followed the career pathway to the superintendency, starting first as a teacher and processing through the path to assistant principal, to principal and to district level administration. Institutional practices, however, are out of control of the employee. Boards of Education, selection committees, and

communities have established mental models of what the experience pathway of an ideal superintendent candidate should include. Cultural mental models view the high school principal position as essential to a superintendent assignment. The high school principal's position is viewed to be:

- Highly visible within the community due to graduations, athletic events, and concerts. This experience is thought to provide high school principals with experience in establishing positive relationships within the community with a large number of people. They become popular leaders if their school team wins a state title or heroes if they are able to guide the school through an episode of violence.
- Involved with management of larger budgets due to size of school and athletic program accounts.
- More involved with facility management, building and maintenance matters because the high school is often viewed as the hub of a community and is utilized more frequently for community gatherings than elementary or middle schools.

The high school principalship, identified as the most desirable experience for those aspiring to the superintendency, is the least accessible to women, including African American women. One of the study participants had experience as a high school principal, but that was only after moving out of the state for a while. None of the participants had in-state experience as a high school principal. Two participants had served for less than five years each as high school assistant principals. Only one participant expressed any reservations with serving as a high school principal. Others said they had no concerns with an appointment as a high school principal. It was never presented to them as an option. One spoke of aspirations to serve as the local high school principal, but she was first appointed to an

elementary assistant principalship, then appointed to a district office position, without an opportunity to serve as principal at either level.

Limiting access to experiences that are viewed as essential to career ascension are institutional practices that intersect with societal perceptions and political clout, two additional sub-themes that emerged from the study. Societal barriers, cultural norms, and mental models are taught and reinforced throughout childhood into adulthood. These models define within a culture, society or community, who has access to what and also identifies commonly accepted norms within a group. Societal perceptions, political power sources, and institutional practices intersect forming a barrier that is difficult for the African American females who does not fit the mental model or cultural norm of the school system chief executive officer. This barrier has been defined as not made of glass but concrete for the African American woman. Gender and race remain the common factors in African American female oppression in school leadership.

Selection addresses the hiring practices, including unwritten rules, hidden agendas, and personal vendettas of elected officials responsible for hiring superintendents. Boards of education tend to not favor women as superintendents based on cultural and societal norms. The female historically is viewed as the homemaker and caregiver for her family. The cultural mental model, steeped in long-term reinforced mental models is that the woman's place is in the home and the mental model of the male's role is as bread winner. Gender structuring or biased ideas regarding the role of the female makes it difficult to receive the support from the group responsible for making a decision as to who the best candidate for the job will be. Participants commented on the traditions of their communities and how women were not regarded as serious candidates for positions.

Participants identified their concern with the present superintendent selection process within some districts in North Carolina. They described it as unfair and biased. Participants shared personal experiences or knowledge of situations that involved board of education members publicly sharing concerns about certain applicants and announcing that they would not support a particular applicant. These actions were not based on a concern for the applicant being able to do the job, but were based primarily on past history between the board member and the applicant. Participants felt that some individuals seek seats on boards of education for the purpose of carrying out a personal agenda or getting back at someone employed in the school system. In these cases the selection process really is not about traditional mental models, gender bias or racial bias, it becomes a personal matter between one in power and another one who is powerless, still a form of oppression.

The process of screening and selection was described as non-transparent. Little to no community input or involvement was incorporated into the search and selection process. In one incident, when community input was solicited by the board of education, a later decision was made to disregard any information received and not include it as part of the process. The power that is given to boards of education by North Carolina legislation, with no process in place to monitor neither the selection process nor a system of accountability for the process. The only accountability system to be considered would be the vote of the constituents. At the end of an election term when constituents return to the polls, voting is the only way to handle community displeasure with school board decisions. An example of boards making decisions that are for personal agendas or vendettas and not in the best interest of children is a recent situation in a North Carolina school district that involved the board of education making decisions and taking action that were not accepted by the

community and sanctioned by the district's regional accrediting agency as unethical. This type of barrier exists for all potential applicants in the pipeline. A teacher or principal should not have to worry about doing what is fair and just in their classrooms or school out of fear that a parent will run for school board in order to get back at them. The selection process is one that crosses gender, race, and class lines.

Disconnection was the third barrier identified by the participants. Disconnection refers to the absence or lack of formal networks and support systems. Goals and achievements are sometimes difficult to attain because of systematic barriers that emerge or that are fostered by those who are leading and have the power. The lack of support and assistance from those who are in power usually results in injustice and inequity for those who are powerless. These systems of support are defined as networks, professional and informal.

Men have culturally been supported by constituents, but usually in biased ways. In general, people support that which is familiar or known to them. The traditional male support structure has been defined as the good old boy network. The long-standing good old boy network functions as a means for men to help advance their careers by providing sponsors, mentors and support structures to other men. Women are not included nor are they invited to be members of this exclusive society.

The lack of access to such networks has been identified as one of the primary barriers for women of color. A lack of involvement and support from critical figures, identified as supporters from within a professional network, have been known to block women's and other members of underrepresented groups from achieving career aspirations. Though each of the participants identified a colleague or group of colleagues that they talked with on a regular

basis or could call on if they had a question, none identified a formal network or support system that they were included in as a member.

The disconnection from formal and even informal networks was viewed by the participants as a barrier to women in North Carolina ascending to the superintendency. Most of the women in the study did not know how many African American women superintendents we had in the state. Only one person knew the names of both of the women, and one participant could name one of the African American superintendents. None of the participants had any kind of professional contact or relationship with either of the African American female superintendents.

While other participants viewed the inability of African American women to organize formal professional networks as the system's way of keeping a group divided and defeated, they shared desires that they hoped that African American women from across the state would somehow form a network to share ideas and support each other. There was consensus among most of the participants that uniting and speaking in one voice would not only bring unity across the state, but would also foster a sense of empowerment among the group.

*Question #2: What are the lived experiences of these women that affect who they are as leaders?*

Early life experiences were identified by each participant as greatly influencing the leaders they became. Themes of a strong sense of community and a caring and relational approach to leading described as central to their leadership style were common to all participants. The same themes of community, ethic of care and relational leadership were evident in the responses to questions and reflections shared by participants. Each of the participants expressed that they had a strong, uncompromising belief and value system that

could not be shaken. Their belief systems were described as essential to their leadership style and defined who they were as leaders and individuals. They described their leadership styles as nurturing, compassionate, and caring more for individuals than the policies. A concern for the well-being of others that is deeply rooted in social justice for all is evidenced by their strong belief in honesty, equity, respectful treatment, being fair and just, without compromise.

These women not only have knowledge of a female culture that includes a strong work ethic and socialization that they bring to the school administrators role, they are also committed to working to get the job done. Commitment to hard work was described as a means of gaining respect from staff members and supervisors. Early childhood influences and expectations influenced and impacted their perceptions of who they are as leaders today. The participants shared stories about early life experiences, role models and mentor relationships that were perceived as influential in shaping their leadership styles.

The significance of experiences and opportunities outside of the home was described as instrumental in shaping perspectives on caring, sense of responsibility, and leadership skills. These experiences and opportunities were defined as school activities, club and organization participation, and mainly church involvement.

Success and confidence as school leaders was attributed to strong and positive early influences of mothers, other family members, community role models, teachers and church involvement. These entities were identified by the participants as having shaped their views within and beyond their communities.

### *Limitations*

According to Creswell (2003), there are limitations in every study. The recognition of limitations assists the qualitative researcher in framing the context of the study, assessing the study methodology and determining the usefulness of the findings (Creswell, 2003). One limitation of this study was that the majority of the participants were from southeastern or eastern regions of North Carolina. A larger and more geographically diverse population may provide a better perspective of experiences, barriers and challenges experienced by African American women from across the state. Hearing more stories from women across North Carolina would have provided more voices in the conversation. However, time can limit both the depth and the extensiveness of a study. While it would have been helpful to expand the study to include more participants and to spend more time with the women in the study, the amount of time to complete the study was limited.

Another limitation was that the study included only one person who had actually applied for a superintendent position. This occurred because criteria were not established in the design of the study to address inclusion of participants who had actually applied for the superintendency. In order to examine fully limited access to the superintendency, it is important to establish that African American women are applying for the position. It is, however, reasonable to assume that a number of African American women, similar to nine of the participants in this study, have not considered applying for the very reasons uncovered in this research.

A third limitation would be that this study focused only on the state of North Carolina. A multi-state study limited to the southeastern region, may yield additional

information as it relates to African American women serving in district leadership roles but not as superintendents.

### *Revisiting the Conceptual Framework*

In revisiting the conceptual framework of the four success indicators identified by Jackson (1999) and five barriers and challenges identified by Alston (1999), I recommend a slightly altered framework. Based on my experience, if I were re-doing this study or making a recommendation to someone else considering such a study, I would recommend merging the concepts of both frameworks.

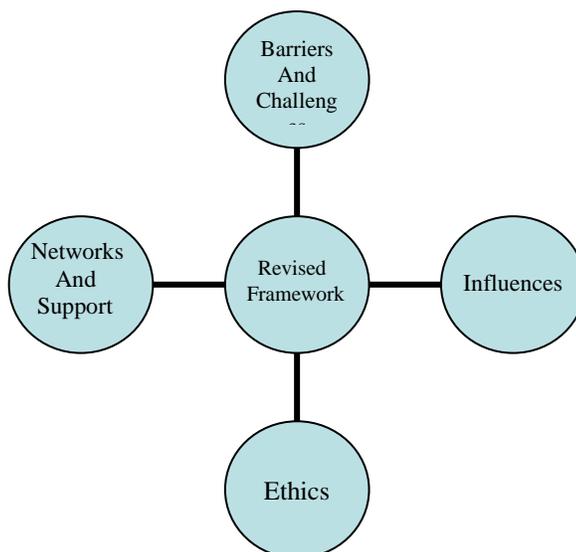


Figure 3. Recommended revised framework.

### *Implications*

Findings from this study have implications for several entities including;

- 1) college and university educational leadership programs, 2) state legislators, 3) local boards of education, and 4) African American women. Implications for each entity are discussed separately.

1) College and university education leadership training programs: Education leadership training programs should encourage and welcome research on African American women in leadership roles in order to continue to add voice to this marginalized group of citizens. Research on women as a group is scarce and literature on African American women is almost non-existent. To better recognize the struggles of the African American woman to gain a place of privilege in our educational society, documenting and telling their stories may inform leadership changes that address their absence.

College and university education leadership training programs should also expand their curriculums to include courses on the experiences of women in educational leadership roles. Experiences of women administrators, women's ways of leading, and information of societal and cultural biases as they effect women and people of color should become a distinct part of study on leadership. Opportunities for African American women to complete intern assignments with other African American females should be created. African American women who are graduates of educational leadership programs should be assigned both male and female, Black and White, interns to supervise.

2) State legislators should revisit legislation that gives sole power to local boards of education in hiring the superintendent for effectiveness, relevance and purpose. In a society that is demanding transparency in operations from all of our governmental agencies to large corporations, it is time to review and perhaps revise current legislation that promotes discriminatory practices at any level.

3) Local boards of education should seek to improve their selection and hiring processes by making the process more transparent to the general public. Boards should examine and adopt employment selection processes and methods that have been identified as effective in hiring

chief executive officers in large private sector corporations. As we progress towards a globally inclusive society, an examination of employment practices of top executive personnel in other countries should also be explored.

4) African American women must recognize that barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina schools do exist and that methodical processes must be employed to ascend through the barriers. African American women must apply for vacant superintendent positions in order to be considered for the position. These women must also recognize the value of established professional networks and support systems and seize opportunities to establish them. Established networks will provide African American women an opportunity to know each other and create mentoring relationships.

#### *Further Research*

Results of this study revealed that there are perceived and experienced barriers and challenges for African American women in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina schools. These barriers and challenges are institutional, societal, cultural, and political structures and practices. They are also identified as being attributed to the selection processes utilized by boards of education and the lack of support systems and networks for African American women. Identified success indicators can also be viewed as barriers to ascension, especially as they relate to women's ways of leading. This study suggests several pertinent areas for further study.

1) Studies that examine the expectations of school board members regarding training, experience and leadership of those considered to be ideal candidates for the superintendent's position. Descriptors provided by board members would provide a profile of the candidate most likely to be selected for the position. This profile could then be used to compare the

training, experience, and leadership style of those actually serving in superintendent position and those aspiring to the position in order to see if the description of what is articulated as desired is a match with who is serving in the position.

2) Research that looks at how other chief executive officers for large private corporations are recruited, selected and hired is recommended. Information gathered from these studies would provide suggestions to boards of education and selection committees on alternatives to the present practice of hiring superintendents.

3) Studies on African American women and how they develop and establish person and professional relationships should be conducted. Results of these studies will add to the research on African American women and to the literature on effective mentoring and networking skill development. More information on developing and nurturing effective support systems and networking opportunities for African American women will help closes the lack of support gap in school administration.

### *Conclusion*

At the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year in North Carolina public schools, there were twenty-one female superintendents. Two of the 21 female school superintendents in the 115 districts in North Carolina public schools were identified as African American women. Alston (2000) asked two questions, “where are the Black female school superintendents and why are they missing in action?” The results of this study identified three major barriers and challenges that limit career advancement and opportunities for African American women in North Carolina schools. In a country and state that boasts of world-class leadership and progress, the question still resounds in North Carolina, why are there still so few African American women ascending in the top executive position in the public schools of this state

and why are they still missing in action? There must be continued studies conducted in order to identify barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina school along with identifying implications for school districts, universities and policy makers that will assist in addressing the gap between African American women in the pipeline to the superintendency and those ascending to the position.

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APPENDIX A

**Informed Consent Form**

## Appalachian State University Educational Leadership Doctoral Studies Program

### Informed Consent

**Study:** The Perception of African American Women about their barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools.

1. Patricia R. Johnson, Ed.S. (pj12912@appstate.edu) doctoral student under the supervision of Jim Killacky (killackycj@appstate.edu), chair of doctoral studies program, is requesting your participation in a research study entitled: The Perception of African American women about their barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools. The purpose of this research study is to identify and examine the barriers and challenges that district level African American female public school administrators identify as obstacles to the superintendency. The study will also identify and examine ways the district level administrators respond and cope with these identified challenges as well as give voice to the women “missing in action” from the superintendency in North Carolina’s public schools.
2. The study is designed to minimize any risk to you; however, if you are uncomfortable answering any of the questions you are free to decline to respond.
3. The benefits of participating in this study for you personally are minimal; however, you will be contributing to the scholarly research on the Perceptions of African American women who are not serving as superintendents in North Carolina and why they believe they are not in those roles.
4. The results of this study will be published in my dissertation however; your name, identity, or school system will not be revealed. You and your district will be assigned a pseudonym and the pseudonym will be used in any reporting of your comments. Your name and school system will only be known to the researchers and any transcriptions will be kept in a secured area accessible only to the researchers named in number one above.
5. Participants may become tired or have some discomfort talking about experiences. You are free to request a break as needed or decline to respond to any question.
6. Any questions you have about the study should be addressed to the researchers in number 1 above.
7. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and will be not compensated. You may discontinue participation at any time.

Participant:

Researcher:

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Date

---

Patricia R. Johnson

---

Date

APPENDIX B

**Interview Protocol and Questions**

*Interview Protocol*

I will be asking you questions today about your perceptions and experiences of barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency encountered in North Carolina public schools. Statistics reveal little change in the representation of women in areas of employment in higher levels of administration, particularly as we examine the office of school superintendent. Nationwide, the 21% of the superintendents across the nation are identified as women per Bjork and Franceschi (2007). Of that 21%, less than 1% of these women are identified as African American. The numbers in North Carolina are even more alarming. Currently in North Carolina, there are two (2) African American female superintendents. While the number of district level African American female school administrators reflect 25%-35% of the employed population, the number of African American women serving as superintendent in North Carolina public schools, does not reflect the number of women in the pipeline. Judy Alston (2000) asked two direct questions, “Where are the Black female superintendent and why are they missing in action?” There is limited research to support in providing answers to this question. The purpose of this study is to begin a conversation with African American female district level school administrators on perceived barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools.

Do you have any questions? Let’s begin.

1. Demographics and Biography (Jackson, 1999)

- a) Tell me about you and your family. (marital status, children, age,
- b) Do you have siblings? How many? Tell me about them. What is your birth order?
- c) What is/are the professions of your siblings (if applicable)

- d) Tell me about your parents---are they still living? How close do you live to them? What is/was their profession?
- e) What was it like growing up in your home?
- f) Are/were your parents employed? What is/were their occupations?
- g) What was it like growing up in your community? What activities were you involved in while growing up?
- h) What early experiences would you identify as having the most influence on your career pathway? Tell me about that/those experiences.
- i) Who would you identify as your earliest support system while growing up? j) j) Why would you identify it/them as your greatest support system while growing up?
- k) While growing up, who did you identify as your role model? Why?
- l. Why do you feel that you majored in education?
- m) Please tell me about you career pathway, starting with your very first assignment in public education.
- n) What degree(s) do you currently hold?
- o) What professional organizations are you involved with a ns what is your level of involvement?
- p) What other community, civic and service organizations are you a member? What is your level of involvement in these organizations?

## 2. Barriers/Challenges (Alston, 1999)

- a. Why did you select education as your career? Why would you say you are still in education today?
- b. If you were not in education, what do you think your profession would be today?
- c. How do you let the public know who you are? How do you open up your life to those you serve?
- d. You stated earlier that you hold/are working on a doctorate degree in education leadership, what was/is your career/professional intent when you enrolled in the doctoral program?
- e. Have you ever entertained the idea of becoming a superintendent of a school district in North Carolina? Why or Why not?
- f. Do you think you will ever apply for a superintendent position in North Carolina?
- g. Why do you feel that African American women are underrepresented as superintendents in North Carolina schools?
- h. For the African American women who are serving as superintendents in the state of North Carolina, what would you say makes them different from you?
- i. Who would you identify as your primary professional mentor currently? Why would you identify them as your primary professional mentor? How do you identify their support? What do they do to support you that make them different from others who are your “cheerleaders”.
- j. Did you seek them out to be your mentor? How and why did you seek them out?  
OR
- k. Did they seek you out to mentor? How and why did they seek you out?

- l. Do you have a network of female colleagues? How frequently do you interact with this network? How was this network developed? What are the primary functions of this network of colleagues?
- m. How much interaction do you have with county commissioners or city council members and you local board of education? How would you describe your relationship(s) with these elected officials?
- n. Why do you think there are only two African American female superintendents in North Carolina public schools?
- o. What do you think could be done to increase the number of African American female superintendents in North Carolina public schools?
- p. Does it really matter that there are only two African American female superintendents in North Carolina public schools?

Thank you very much for your participation in this study.

APPENDIX C

**Data Analysis Code Key**

## Data Analysis Coding Key

## Emerging Themes (3/10/2010)

Early Life Experiences:	ELE
Family Influences:	FI
Community Influences:	CI
Maternal Influences:	MI
Paternal Influences:	PI
Sibling Relationship	SR
Early Church Involvement/Influence	ECII
Community School/Involvement	CSI
Educational Experiences	EE
Work Experiences	WE
Mentor Support	MS
Work Ethic	WK ET
Perceived Barriers and Challenges (glass ceilings, cultural and societal perceptions, cultural and societal expectations, school board concerns, no support systems)	PB & C
Frustrations	F!

## Code Revisions (Combining Common Themes)

Early Life Experiences	ELE
Mothers' Influences	MI
Family Influences	Fam Inf
Community Influences	Comm Inf
Expectations from others	Exp0
Expectations of self	ExpS
Early Community Involvement	ECI
School Involvement	ECI
Church Involvement	CI
Educational Training	EdT
College Preparation	CPrep
Continuous Education	ContEd
Credential Importance	CredImp
Work Experiences	WE
Ethics	Ets
Teaching Experiences	TeEx
Administrative Experience	AdEx
Perceived Barriers and Challenges	B & C

Identified Themes and Sub-themes  
(Final Code Revision)

Success Indicators	SI
Ethics	E
Care and Respect	
Fairness and Equity	
Honesty and Integrity	
Hard Work	
Influences	I
Maternal Influence	
Early School Experiences Influence	
Other Family Members and Community Role Model Experiences	
Early Church Experiences Influence	
Expectations	Ex
High Standards and Expectations from Family Members	
High Standards and Expectations for Self	
Preparedness	P
Formal Education Preparation	
Career Pathways and Experiences	
Barriers and Challenges	B & C
Oppression	O
Institutional Structures and Practices	
Societal and Cultural Perceptions	
Political Clout	
Selection	S
Hiring Processes and Practices	
Unwritten Rules	
Hidden Agendas and Vendettas	
Disconnection	D
Lack of Professional Networks and Support Systems	

APPENDIX D

**Appalachian State University Internal Review Board Approval**

# APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office Use Only \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

## REQUEST FOR REVIEW OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS RESEARCH

Please type and submit one signed copy to irb@appstate.edu or mail to Research and Graduate Studies, John E. Thomas Building.

1. Date: 10 / 27 / 2008
2. Project Title: Still Missing in Action: The Perceptions of African American Women About Their Barriers and Challenges in Ascending to the Superintendency in North Carolina Public Schools.
3. Principal Investigators: Patricia R. Johnson
4. Phone: (828) 294-0407 Post Office Address: N/A
5. E-mail address: pj12912@appstate.edu Post Office Address: N/A
6. Academic Department/Unit: Educational Leadership-Doctoral Program
7. Relationship to Appalachian State University (http://www.citiprogram.org/default.asp?language=english) required for human subject research. Do the investigators have documentation of completion on file in the IRB Office?  
Yes X No \_\_\_\_\_
14. Does this research involve any out-of-country travel? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No X

I have read Appalachian State University's Policy and Procedures on Human Subjects Research and agree to abide them. I also agree to report and significant and relevant changes in procedures and instruments as they relate to participants to the Chairperson of the Institutional Review Board

_____	_____	_____	_____
PI	Date	Co-investigator	Date
_____	_____	_____	_____
If PI is student, Faculty Mentor Date	Date	Co-investigator	

## CHECKLIST FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

1. Purpose of proposed research.

**Research study will be conducted in partial completion of requirements for Ed D program. The study will examine the perceptions of African American women and their barriers and challenges in ascending to the superintendency in North Carolina public schools.**

2. Briefly describe your subject population. Will any individuals be excluded solely on the basis of gender, race, color, or any other demographic characteristic? If so, please explain.

**The study will include 10 (ten) African American female central office level administrators (associate superintendent, assistant superintendent or Director positions) in public schools across North Carolina as participants. Participant selection is limited to women who either hold doctorate degrees or are currently enrolled in a Ph. D. or Ed. D. program.**

3. Give a brief description of your research procedures as they relate to the use of human participants. This description should include, at least, the following:

- Procedures (**See Attached**)
- Name and description of data gathering instrument (attach copy, if applicable)- **N/A**
- How will the data be collected? (e.g., audio, video, written records)- (**See Attached**)
- Sample size: **10 subjects will participate in the study**
- How long will the procedures take? **1.5 hours will be allocated for each interview**
- What, if any, relationship exists between the researcher(s) and the participants? **None**
- What, if any, relationship exists between the researcher(s) and the agencies (e.g., schools, hospitals, homes)? **None**
- Attach statement of approval from any agencies (e.g., schools, hospitals, homes) that will be involved with recruitment of participants or data collection. **N/A**

4. Is deception involved? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO **X**  
If yes, please describe.

5. Do the data to be collected relate to any illegal activities (e.g. drug use, abuse, assault)?  
YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO **X**  
If yes, please explain.

6. The benefits of this activity to the participants must outweigh the potential risks. To this end, please:

- a. Describe the benefits to the individual participants and to society.

**The study will:**

**Identify and examine barriers and challenges in the pathway to the superintendent's position for African American women in North Carolina public schools.**

**Identify and examine how they respond to and cope with the challenges and obstacles that they face as related to workplace advancement.**

**Include the voices of the "women missing in action" from the superintendent's role in North Carolina, as they tell their stories of their career personal and professional pathways.**

- b. Describe the potential risks to any individual participating in this project. Please explain any possible risks of psychological, legal, physical, or social harm. What provisions have been made to insure that appropriate facilities and professional attention necessary for the health and safety of the participants are available and will be utilized?

**The study involves subjects participating in interviews relative to personal perception and experiences. There is no potential for harm to subjects involved in this study.**

7. Please describe how participants will be informed of their rights and how informed consent will be obtained and documented. Attach a copy of the consent form and any materials used in the recruitment of participants.

**Each participant will be contacted personally by researcher, via telephone, to inform them initially about the study and to seek their participation. Each phone call will be followed with written information that will include a detailed explanation of the study, and consent forms. These items will be mailed (US postal service) to each participant. (see attached)**

8. The confidentiality of all participants must be maintained. To this end, please respond to the following.

- a. How will the confidentiality of participants be maintained?

**For the purpose of this study, participants will not be identified in the study by name, but will be given an opportunity to provide a *pseudo* name or the researcher will assign a "study name" if not provided by the subject. The subject's employing district will not be identified in the study. Employers will be identified by geographical area (i.e. Northwest, Southeast, etc.). The name of individuals named by participants in the study will be changed to *pseudo* names to protect the identity of the subjects and individuals.**

b. How will confidentiality of data be maintained?

**All collected data (hard copies of any printed material, audio/video tapes and electronic information) will be maintained in forms that are not accessible to others (i.e. locked file containers, password protected electronic storage).**

c. Describe the process of final disposition of the data. How long will the data be stored and how will they be destroyed?

**Collected data will be maintained for a period not to exceed 2 years. Data will be stored in its original form until that period has expired then it will be destroyed by shredding of hard copies, and electronically erasing of audiotapes and discs.**

d. How are participants protected from the future harmful use of the data collected in this protocol?

**Data will only be used in partial completion of graduation requirements for the Ed. D degree in the Educational Leadership Program at Appalachian State University. Future use of any data will only be by the researcher for further study, writing or presentations.**

### **Attachment**

3. Procedures and Data Collection:

1. Participants will be individually interviewed.
2. The interview protocol is drawn from the conceptual works of Jackson (1999) and Alston (1999) and is presented below.
3. Interviews will be scheduled for 909 minutes, with follow up session(s) as needed for clarification or elaboration. Follow up interviews may be conducted via the telephone.
4. Interviews and resumes will be used to collect data.

### **Interview Protocol**

- I. Demographics and Biography (Jackson, 1999)
  - A. Each participant will be asked to provide the following information: age; marital status; (if married) husband's profession; number of children; ages of children; profession of employed children; current job title; number of years in current position; birth county/town/city.
  - B. What degrees do you hold? What was your major in each degreed area?
  - C. Tell me about your career pathway, starting with your first assignment as a professional educator.

- D. What professional organization are you involved in and what is your level of involvement in them?
- E. What other community, civic and service organizations are you a member? To what extent are you involved with them?
- F. How would you describe the demographics of your current school district? (i.e. number of students; racial/ethnic ration of school; urban/ suburban/ rural; racial diversity)?
- G. Tell me about your experiences in the following situations:  
 Growing up in (hometown/county)  
 What early experiences would you identify as having the most influence on your career pathway?  
 Tell me about that/those experiences(s).  
 Who or what would you identify as your earliest support system while growing up? Why would you identify it/them as your greatest support growing up?
- H. While growing up, who did you identify as your role model? Why?

II. Barriers/Challenges (Alston, 1999)

- A. Why did you select education as your career? Why would you say you are still in education today?
- B. How do you let the public know who you are? How do you open your life up to those you serve?
- C. You stated at the beginning of this interview, that you (hold/are working on a doctorate degree in education leadership, what was/ is your career/professional intent when you enrolled in the doctoral program?
- D. Have you ever entertained the idea of becoming a superintendent of schools in North Carolina? Why or why not?
- E. Why do you feel there are so few African American female superintendents across the state of North Carolina?
- F. For the few that are serving as superintendents in the state, what would you say makes them different from you?
- G. Who would you identify as your primary professional mentor currently? Why would you identify that person? How do you identify their support? What do they do to support you that make them different from other colleagues? How and why did you select them or did they seek you out to mentor to? Why do you think they selected you or why did you select them?

How much interaction do you have with county commissioners or city council members, and your local board of education members? How would you describe your relationship (s) with these elected officials?

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patricia Rhyne Johnson a native of Gastonia North Carolina is the younger of two children born to Anne and Willie Rhyne. She was educated in Gaston County Schools and is a proud member of the second graduating class of Ashbrook High School. She attended Elizabeth City State University in Elizabeth City, North Carolina earning a Bachelors degree in English in 1976. In 1978 she was awarded a Master of Arts degree in Speech Pathology and Audiology from South Carolina State University, in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Patricia earned an Education Specialist degree in 1994 and a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership in 2010 from Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina.

A resident of Hickory North Carolina for the past thirty years, Patricia is married to Larry Johnson and the mother of two adult sons, Ryan and Clayton. A public educator for thirty-two years, she is currently employed as the Associate Superintendent of Human Resources for the Caldwell County School System.