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In the United States, Black women rarely serve as superintendents. Historically, White males have monopolized executive leadership roles in education, and the trend data remains consistent to present times. Given these patterns, we have constructed our knowledge of the superintendency from a White male perspective. Consequently, this singular viewpoint does not illustrate the lived experiences of Black women superintendents.

This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of Black women superintendents leading public school districts in the Southeast region of the United States. By investigating the perspectives of African American women superintendents, this study is significant because of its potential to aid researchers and practitioners in redefining educational leadership in more inclusive ways.

The research design included elements of portraiture, a qualitative methodological approach, which infuses both aesthetics and empiricism to capture the stories of three African American women superintendents. I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data from semi-structured interviews to compose each superintendent's personal narrative that reflects their unique Black Girl Magic. Their personal stories guide the reader on a journey to understand how Black women superintendents described their leadership, the challenges they encountered, and the attributes and supports that contributed to their success. Notably, I used Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought to frame my study. By elevating the participants' voices, the portraits reveal how Black women perceive their identities influence their lived experiences.

The findings indicate that the Black women superintendents in this study share similarities in their experiences, yet their perceptions and interpretations of their experiences

vary. The study's findings also indicate that issues of race, gender, and the intersections of both significantly impacted their lived experiences. These Black women superintendents, though marginalized by both race and gender, historically viewed as an "other" and seen as inferior, use their Black Girl Magic to flourish and thrive in the most influential position in education: the superintendency. I discuss implications of my study for research and practice, including the need to create spaces for Black women to lead with authenticity, understand how context shapes their everyday lives, and examine the critical importance of Black female mentors.

Keywords: Black women superintendents, superintendency, portraiture

PORTRAITS OF BLACK GIRL MAGIC: UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family (Larry and Linda Clemons, Arlene Danner, Laconya Galloway, Darrian Turner, and Alisha Griggs), who have been my anchor. I also dedicate this dissertation to my great nieces and nephews (Kyndin Turner, Aerial Turner, Kash Turner, Naomi McLean, and August McLean). My family's unwavering love, support, and sacrifice have been invaluable to me.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

My Blackness is just too much for some people to handle. I'm a confident, intelligent, beautiful, and powerful Black woman with greatness inside my DNA. I'm also straightforward, authentic, and unapologetic. I'm a driven, resilient Black woman with integrity, and I gladly take on challenges with my head held high. I'm not afraid to use my voice, I'm not afraid to be uniquely me, I'm not afraid to stand alone, and I'm not afraid to step outside of my comfort zone. I'm a Black Queen that doesn't make excuses, I find solutions. I won't apologize for being exquisite! — Stephanie Lahart, author of *Overcoming Life's Obstacles*

I am a Black female principal, born in a family of educators who have instilled in me the confidence, courage, and resilience I need to accomplish extraordinary things. Many Black women in my life have cultivated my "Black Girl Magic." In 2013, Cashawn Thompson created the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic to acknowledge and celebrate how Black women exude excellence. It is their beauty, their strength, and their influence that make them magical. Thompson (2021) stated, "Black Girls are Magic is the concept behind the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag and global movement. It is the understanding that Black women and girls are able to do both ordinary and extraordinary things because we are ordinary and extraordinary" (para. 2). Black Girl Magic is not reserved for the elite, but it is the greatness that resides in every Black woman.

As a child, I first saw examples of Black Girl Magic from my mother, who used her voice to stand up for what she believed in, and my sisters, who proudly embraced their uniqueness. Both have empowered me to use my voice and never be afraid to let my light shine. I am fortunate to have the opportunities to connect with Black women leaders who are trailblazers in education and who leave a legacy of greatness in the communities they serve. These women

empower and inspire me to unleash my Black Girl Magic. As an aspiring superintendent, it is my unwavering desire to understand the lived experiences of Black women superintendents. To do so, I intend to create three portraits that reflect each superintendent's unique Black Girl Magic.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, White males have monopolized the superintendent position. After the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* led to school desegregation, many African American educators lost their teaching and administrative positions (Alston, 2005; Angel et al., 2013; Wiley et al., 2017). Today, there are a small number of women who are serve in the superintendent role, and the number of African American females are even fewer (Brown, 2014; Wiley et al., 2017). In 2000, women superintendents made up approximately 14% of the nation's superintendents, while Black women make up less than 1% (Glass et al., 2000). Twenty years later, Black women still make up less than 1% of superintendents (Tienken, 2020). Furthermore, the small number of African American female superintendents naturally limit the discourse about their lived experiences and how they lead in the superintendency. The experiences of White males, White women, and Black men do not capture the lived experiences of African American women superintendents.

Black women's voices are often silenced in educational leadership. Their voices have been suppressed by the hegemonic ideologies that permeate throughout our society, including our educational system (Collins, 2009). Educational researchers must include the voices of African American women to understand their unique journeys to and in the superintendency. Scholars who forge ahead to explore the lived experiences of current Black women superintendents can leverage such research to redefine educational leadership.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to understand the lived experiences of African American women superintendents serving in the PK-12 public school setting. I use the terms Black and African American interchangeably throughout this study. Using Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality as my theoretical framework, I examined the lived experiences of Black women in the superintendency. In conducting my study, I sought to understand how Black women superintendents describe their leadership, how they speak about their challenges, and what supports they discuss needing to thrive in their position. In addition, I also hoped to capture the superintendents' perceptions of how their identity impacts their lived experiences.

Research Questions

I sought to better understand the lived experiences of African American women superintendents. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do African American women superintendents describe how they lead?
2. How do African American women superintendents speak about the challenges they encounter?
3. What attributes and supports do African American women superintendents perceive as contributing to their success?
4. How do African American women superintendents perceive their identities (race and gender) have influenced their lived experiences as superintendents?

Background

Black women who rise to the superintendency must embrace and lead through certain issues that confront all superintendents. As the chief executive officer, the superintendent has myriad responsibilities. For example, the superintendent seeks to provide a high-quality

education for students, build teacher and staff capacity, meet the demands of the community, and continually fulfill the board of education's expectations. Moreover, successful superintendents exhibit strong communication skills as they interact with multiple stakeholders and build partnerships to support the organization's operational and financial health (Alston, 2005; Björk et al., 2018; Björk & Keedy, 2001; Glass et al., 2000). In educational leadership, lead executives are called to create a shared vision that is clear and inspiring, to facilitate the strategic planning process, ensure that educators employ best practices, and reshape a culture that supports the district's vision and mission. Superintendents' responsibilities also include, but are not limited to, the recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff and the development of community relations (Björk et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2000).

Superintendents experience a variety of challenges in their position. One challenge is to redesign the educational system to support the increasing number of students of color. There are approximately 50 million students that are served in K-12 public education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Each of these students enter classrooms, whether in person or virtual, with a unique set of gifts, talents, interests, needs, and aspirations. Despite a large body of research, school leaders struggle to meet all students' needs—specifically students of color. Student demographics continue to change in the United States, which implies that our teaching, learning, and leadership approach must adapt to the demographical changes of our schools (Horsford, 2012). Other challenges exist such as the teacher shortage, funding limitations, and ongoing criticisms. As difficult as these tasks may seem, education in a district is a collective effort of many but led by one—the superintendent.

Despite performing duties and facing challenges common to all superintendents, Black women's experiences are different. Nonetheless, existing research on superintendents rarely

accounts for the unique journeys of Black women superintendents. From Jeanes Supervisors to modern-day superintendents, Black women have demonstrated a strong commitment to students and education (Alston, 2000; Jackson, 1999; Wiley et al., 2017). Historically, however, accessing executive leadership roles in education has been difficult for Black educators, especially for Black women (Alston, 2005; Angel et al., 2013; Wiley et al., 2017).

Early studies about Black female superintendents reveal that Black women have a wealth of knowledge and experience when they assume the superintendency. Black women are often prepared to lead because of prior personal and professional leadership experiences (Jackson, 1999; Alston, 2005). African American women superintendents are passionate, strong-willed, and are on a quest to improve the lives of all children (Jackson, 1999; Revere, 1987). They are often placed in school districts with primarily Black and brown students (Alston, 2005). Black women seek to dismantle systems of oppression that hinder student success (Tillman & Cochran, 2000), and by nature, they exhibit social justice leadership practices. Recent scholars describe Black women leaders and superintendents as tempered radicals (Alston, 2005) and bridge leaders (Horsford, 2012) whose work is grounded in service. Tempered radicalism describes the ways that Black women are progressive and seek social change, however their approach is to work within the defined boundaries (Alston, 2005). Similarly, bridge leadership represents the socially-just leadership practices that Black women use to serve our most vulnerable population (Horsford, 2012). Both concepts reflect leadership approaches that describe how Black women position themselves to achieve social justice and to eliminate the marginalization of students of color.

Many scholars acknowledge that race, gender, and class are salient factors that impact Black women's personal and professional experiences (Alston, 2005; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw,

1989; Crenshaw, 2020; Horsford, 2009; Horsford et al., 2021). Several scholars explain that African American women endure both race and gender discrimination (Alston, 2000; Brown, 2014; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). They are marginalized based on their race and gender; however, it is the intersection of both identities that generates a new challenge to navigating the White, male dominated society.

The research literature has also highlighted challenges that African American women experience in the superintendency and how they have overcome those barriers. African American women are not granted the same freedoms as others who do not identify as Black and female. “It often requires conformity or even a masking of their true selves in order to be what White society would have them to be” (Brown, 2014, p. 574). Black women must live in two different worlds. In order to fit in, Black women feel pressured to change how they look and talk when they are in their workspace. African American women also experience the “concrete ceiling” phenomena which represent the multi-dimensional system of oppression that limit their mobility in the workforce (Barnes, 2017; Reed, 2012).

African American women are also often asked to lead in difficult situations. They are found in urban school districts that are not properly maintained, poorly managed, and lack many resources (Alston, 2005). As leaders, Black women experience the negative perceptions and stereotypes that others place on them, and they also attempt to navigate what is commonly referred to as the *good ol’ boy system* (Barnes, 2017; Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Consequently, African American women superintendents feel that they are held to higher standards than others in the same position (Brown, 2014). To overcome such challenges, African American women use professional networks and mentors to navigate the challenges (Brown, 2014), and attribute

their spirituality, faith, and family support systems as factors that contribute to their success (Alston, 2005).

Although there is a growing body of research on Black women superintendents, there is more to discover about their lived experiences. We must allow their stories and their truth to be heard. Through my research, I hope to use Black women superintendents' perspectives to advance the profession.

Brief Description of Methods

Qualitative research allows the researcher to capture the participant's personal stories and experiences as a vehicle to understand their perspectives (Patton, 2015). In this qualitative study, I used portraiture to develop vivid descriptions or "portraits" of three Black female superintendents. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) explained, "portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (p. 3). I used semi-structured interviews as my data collection tool. The interviews helped me gain in-depth insights to understand superintendents' perceptions about the behaviors and practices they employ to achieve success.

After conducting an initial meeting to introduce myself and get to know each superintendent better, I interviewed each superintendent in two sessions which were approximately 60 minutes each. In the interviews, the participants discussed their journeys to the superintendency. Each woman shared their experiences as superintendents and perceptions of how their identities impact their work. When analyzing transcripts of the interviews, I used a coding strategy to identify emerging themes and discern relationships among those existing themes. I discuss my methodology and methods in more depth in Chapter III.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I employed Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as my theoretical framework for understanding the lived experiences of African American women. I began with Intersectionality because it represents how multiple identities influence a person's lived experience. Many scholars have examined the intersections of race and gender to understand the lived experiences of Black women (Alston, 2005; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Horsford, 2009; Crenshaw, 2020), and specifically Black women superintendents (Alston, 2005; Horsford, 2009; Horsford et al., 2021). Intersectionality helps us to consider the complexity of the Black woman's experience when both identities (race and gender) are combined.

Intersectionality is woven into the core elements of Black Feminist Thought. Black Feminist Thought, a critical social theory, acknowledges the unique status of African American women. Collins (2009) develops a framework for Black Feminist Thought with the following six key features:

1. Black Feminist Thought aims to empower African American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions.
2. Black women face common challenges; however, they do not all have the same experiences nor agree on the significance of our varying experiences.
3. Black Feminist Thought links Black women's experience as a heterogeneous collectivity and ensuing group knowledge or standpoint.
4. The existence of a Black women's standpoint does not mean that African American women appreciate its content, see its significance, or recognize its potential as a catalyst for social change.

5. Black Feminist Thought, as a critical social theory and Black feminist practice, cannot be static; changes in social conditions will change our knowledge and practice.
6. Black Feminist Thought is related to other social justice projects; it's a part of the wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice.

Intersectionality and the six core principles of Black Feminist Thought will serve as the framework for my study, enabling me to understand my participant's lived experiences and to capture their personal narratives. I discuss my theoretical framework in more detail in Chapter II.

Researcher Experience/Perspective

When describing qualitative inquiry, Patton (2015) argues that the qualitative approach is personal because the researcher's background, experience, and training matters and can potentially influence the research findings. As an elementary school principal who has 13 years of school administrative experience, I am passionate about leadership, equity, social justice, and professional learning. In an effort to combine my areas of interest, I explore the experiences of African American women in leadership. As an aspiring superintendent, I seek to understand the lived experiences of Black women superintendents, learn about the struggles they encounter and the challenges they face in leading for social justice. In the past several years as a principal, I have experienced my voice being silenced on many issues, specifically issues related to social justice. I acknowledge that these experiences in leadership continue to shape my understanding of the world and will impact my understanding of the lived experiences of African American women superintendents.

My identity, personal background, and professional experiences have influenced my passion for social justice leadership and for creating socially just schools. As previously stated, I am an African American female who grew up in a family of educators who believed education

was the vehicle for success and prosperity. I couldn't identify personal examples of racism or injustice at an early age, but my parents understood that racism exists and they served as my advocate. They wanted to ensure that I had every opportunity to succeed; therefore, they were actively involved in my education and ready to confront any issues of racism or any issues that limited my opportunities.

As a young adult, I recall a few encounters with white adults who were always surprised by my accomplishments and recognitions. While I did not verbalize what I was thinking, I knew their interactions with me was a reflection of how they saw me. As I moved into the teaching profession and eventually the principal position, I had very similar interactions with new people that I met. When asked about my job or career, I gave my typical response that I was in education. I would usually receive another question asking if I was a teacher or teacher assistant. After sharing that I was an elementary principal or assistant principal, every response I received was some variation of, Oh wow! At times, their dispositions would shift, or their interactions with me would change. I have had many people walk into the school office and assume that my secretary, who is white, was the principal. It became more evident that their assumptions and reactions reflected implicit bias and low expectations of people who looked like me.

My professional experiences have also strengthened my commitment to bring about change in education. I worked in a low-performing school and district in my first 2 years of the principalship. My school's student population was primarily Black and Hispanic children, and over 95% of the students received free or reduced lunch. From the inception of the school, the lack of robust systems and support, policies, and district and school practices has hindered student success. This experience taught me that district leadership heavily impacts schools, and sustainable change begins at the top.

As I have received many recognitions and awards in the field of education, it feels like an uphill battle to gain the same respect and opportunities white males are privileged to receive within the field. My mentor shared words of wisdom that have resonated with me for the past few years. He said, “No matter what you do or how successful you are, others will never let you forget that you are Black.” I have found this to be my truth and my reality. Despite being the North Carolina Principal of the Year, others remind me of how they see us.

Significance of My Study

There are many scholars who have studied superintendents, but fewer have investigated the lived experiences of African American women superintendents. My study is significant in two ways. First, this study elevates the voices of African American women who are often silenced because they are positioned at the bottom of the social ladder. African American women are not often valued and celebrated for their leadership, and this study highlights the personal strengths that they bring to the superintendency, also known as their Black Girl Magic. Secondly, my study adds to the body of research on African American women superintendents and help us understand the complexity, the nuances, and the uniqueness of their experiences (Alston, 2000, 2005; Brown, 2014; Goines-Harris, 2020; Horsford, 2012; Horsford et al., 2021; Jackson, 1999; Revere, 1987; Tillman & Cochran, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017). Scholars who conduct research on African American women superintendents have routinely emphasized the urgent need to expand scholarship on the topic (Alston, 2000, 2005; Grooms et al., 2021; Tillman & Cochran, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017). Notably, my study adds to the existing research by providing rich portraits of individual superintendents, which provide unique insights on how they lead. In its focus on Black women superintendents, my study has the potential to help researchers and practitioners in

redefining educational leadership generally and the superintendency specifically in more inclusive ways.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter I, I introduced my study of African American women superintendents. I provided background information that outlines the nature of problem. I also identified the purpose of the study, the research questions, the theoretical framework, and my perspective as a researcher. I also explained why this study is relevant to educational research and practice.

In Chapter II, I review existing research related to superintendents and their roles as well as the experiences of Black women superintendents. I also examine in further detail my theoretical framework of Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought. In Chapter III, I describe the qualitative research design and methodological approaches that I used to conduct my research study. I describe my data collection methods and process for data analysis. In particular, I describe how I will use elements of portraiture to create my participant portraits.

I introduce three African American women superintendents, Cinnamon Taylor, Olivia Robinson, and Carrie Broome in Chapters IV, V, and VI, respectively. Each chapter is the superintendent's portrait which provides a rich description of their childhood experiences and their pathway to and throughout the superintendency. Each portrait elevates the voice of each participant and is uniquely constructed to reveal their lived experiences. In Chapter VII, I analyze my findings and provide recommendations for superintendents and for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Superintendents have the power to influence change in classrooms, schools, and the school district as a whole. These pivotal leaders are uniquely positioned to be change agents who can transform the district's schools into engaging, equitable, and inclusive learning spaces that benefit all students. However, superintendents must acknowledge and overcome barriers that inhibit equity and excellence for all students. In the United States, we are amid a pandemic of not meeting the needs of our country's Black and Brown children (Chern & Halpin, 2016; Grooms et al., 2021; Michie, 2007). Superintendents can play a key role in helping foster better educational opportunities for minoritized students (Tienken, 2020).

Examining the historical data on superintendents, however, reveals that the superintendency has traditionally been dominated by white male educators (Alston, 2000; Angel et al., 2013; Brown, 2014; Horsford et al., 2021; Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021; Wiley et al., 2017). For a couple of decades now, a small number of women have served as superintendents, and the number of African American females in the position is even fewer (Alston, 2000, 2005; Brown, 2014; Tillman & Cochran, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017). The 2020 decennial study from American Association of School Administrators (AASA) indicated that African American women superintendents represented less than 1% of the respondents across the nation (Tienken, 2020). According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (as cited in Angel et al., 2013), only two African American women (1.73%) served as North Carolina public school superintendents in 2011. A decade has passed, and there are currently 8 African American women (6.95%) in this role (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). While this evidence shows modest gains in the number of Black female superintendents in North Carolina over the last 10 years, the gains have been minimal in the United States. As African American

women are afforded opportunities to lead our public schools, their realities and experiences are different from those of superintendents from different gender and racial backgrounds (Stanley, 2009). The stories of African American women superintendents should be told.

In this literature review, I begin by providing a historical overview of the superintendency and describing superintendents' roles and responsibilities. I then examine the research regarding the experiences and practices of African American women superintendents. I conclude by explaining my theoretical framework of Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought in detail.

The Superintendency

Historical Considerations

The superintendent position emerged shortly after the inception of the first public school. The first state superintendent was appointed in New York in 1812 (Houston, 2002; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). All 50 states are led by state superintendents, and their responsibilities vary from state to state (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Initially, the state superintendent was responsible for tasks such as creating a common plan for schools, allotment of state funds, and communicating school-information to the state legislatures (Houston, 2002; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Due to the increase in population and expansion to the West, county superintendents and eventually local superintendents were needed to oversee the daily operations of schools. By 1865, the local superintendent position was a growing profession. The National Education Association created a superintendents division which later became the American Association of School Administrators (Houston, 2002).

Our educational system has been shaped by many social, political, and economic forces. These forces have also shaped how superintendents approach their work and meet the demands

of the people they serve (Björk et al., 2014; Feuerstein, 2013). In addition, technological changes have also redefined the superintendency (Björk et al., 2014). The purpose and goals of education have evolved over time. The purpose of education was initially designed to promote civic engagement and a democratic way of life, but this approach was disrupted by business interests. Feuerstein (2013) reports that Robert Callahan's 1962's study, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, is a great example of how the business industry has influenced education; hence influencing the leadership practices of superintendents then and now. He also noted that district leaders became businessmen rather than building a community that prioritized student development. In alignment with the business model, superintendents led schools designed for efficiency and perpetuated a sorting system that ranked individuals based on their capacity (Feuerstein, 2013).

Another turning point in educational reform that influenced the superintendency was national concerns about public education. In 1983, the release of the *A Nation at Risk* report led to a focus on school improvement, student performance, and increased accountability (Björk et al., 2018). Several other national reports followed and eventually led to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001. This legislation provided more control of schooling at the state level resulting in more bureaucracy at the local level. Yet again, superintendents responded to these legislative changes and developed a course of action. Historically, leaders have considered whether a top-down or bottom-up approach was best suited for leading schools to academic success; however, a balance of both was needed to support school reform (Björk et al., 2018). More attention was given to district leadership and the superintendent's role in sustaining school improvement.

The Superintendent's Traditional Roles

The literature describing the superintendent's role has suggested that these district executives take on five major roles that they must fulfill simultaneously. These roles have evolved over the past 150 years but are still relevant to today's superintendents (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Björk et al. (2018) conducted an analysis on the five roles that superintendents assume in their leadership, and the need for leaders to address the various challenges in education today. The five roles included teacher-scholar, organizational manager, democratic leader, social scientist, and communicator. I explain each of these roles in more detail below.

As a *teacher-scholar*, the superintendent was originally viewed as master teacher; therefore, teaching and administration were not viewed as separate professions. Superintendents as teacher-scholars set a vision for district improvement by improving instruction, setting high expectations for students and teachers, monitoring student performance, and engaging in strategic planning (Björk et al., 2018). The superintendent's instructional lens has fluctuated over the past 100 years; however, after the release of *A Nation at Risk* report, there was a greater emphasis on instructional leadership (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Since the superintendent governs all instructional matters, they are responsible for developing excellent and robust academic programs (Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021). Superintendents also assumed the role of *organizational managers*. School boards expect superintendents to oversee daily operations such as budgets, supervision of personnel, and facility management (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Managerial skills became essential as urbanization emerged and large school districts needed leaders to manage physical and human resources.

Superintendents were also expected to be *democratic leaders* who were skilled as political strategists (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). In this political role, their responsibilities included eliciting public support for education, lobbying for state funding, working with local government and school boards, responding to the demands of interest groups, speaking about controversial issues, and leading educators through change initiatives. Superintendents in small and large districts have needed to navigate the political landscape differently. Superintendents of large districts have experienced political action that is overtly directed against them by significant groups, while small, rural leaders have used relationships with key individuals to navigate the political scene (Björk et al., 2018). Another role that superintendents assume is as an applied *social scientist*, which signifies their ability to understand the larger context of their districts and how economic and sociopolitical factors impact education. Finally, superintendents serve as *communicators*. Communication is an important element in building relationships, improving schools, collaborating among educators, and engaging families. Communication and culture go hand-in-hand and are critical to the leader's success (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). As I stated above, scholars suggested that superintendents must assume all of these roles as they navigate changes and lead district transformation.

Modern Superintendents

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) is a national organization that has conducted several decennial studies to describe the state of the superintendency. Most recently, the 2020 decennial study included responses from 1218 superintendents from across 45 states. According to the 2020 report, 91% of the superintendents were white males with experience as a superintendent ranging from 2-8 years. 26% of the superintendents were women, and 8% were persons of color. Compared to the 2000 study, women superintendents increased

from 13% to 26% and persons of color from 5% to 8% (Tienken, 2020). Although this data only represents the respondents to the survey, it provides some insight into the limited number of women and persons of color who are currently serving in the superintendency. Historically, white, middle-class males occupy majority of the superintendent positions (Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021), and the AASA study suggests that this trend continues in the United States today (Tienken, 2020). Although there were minimal changes in superintendent demographics, data reflected the fact that superintendents lead districts that serve an increased number of students of color (Tienken, 2020).

The superintendency is a well-respected, highly influential position in education (Houston, 2002; Miller et al., 2009). Superintendents hold the highest-ranking position within the school district, and they are appointed to this position by the local board of education. Most local school board members are elected by their local community and assume governance for the school system. Most superintendents identify as white, male educators who have moved up through ranks. There are a few non-educators leading school districts mostly in large, urban districts. Although school board members determine the superintendent's employment, the members of the board leverage the superintendent's knowledge and expertise to guide their decision-making (Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021). Ideally, both the superintendent and school board members work collaboratively to achieve positive outcomes for students, educators, and the community they serve.

The superintendent is given the authority to oversee the daily life of the school system. They are visible and well connected to the community (Björk et al., 2018; Chingos et al., 2014; DeMatthews et al., 2017; Houston, 2002; Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021). Scholars note that the superintendent's day-to-day responsibilities are diverse (Björk et al., 2018; Miles Nash &

Grogan, 2021; Tienken, 2020). According to Björk et al. (2018), superintendents with a smaller population of schools and students may be more involved in the day-to-day operations of schools than leaders of larger school districts. Miles Nash and Grogan (2021) also suggest that the district size and complexity determines the district superintendent's responsibilities. Some superintendents have deputy, associate, and/or assistant superintendents who assist the superintendent in carrying out their daily responsibilities. Other superintendents have a limited central office staff; therefore, the superintendent handles more day-to-day operations. Tienken (2020) also identified district enrollment, superintendent demographics, and characteristics of the student and community population as factors that influence the superintendent's job.

Superintendents' responsibilities may vary; however, effective leaders demonstrate behaviors, practices and competencies that lead to success.

To be successful, it is now a requirement for school system leaders to know how to establish useful relationships with community members, business leaders and higher education officials, resolve conflicts between stakeholders, manage staff, engage and respond to school board members, and lead conversations about equity and inclusion, while still acting as the district's expert on curriculum and pedagogy. The work is difficult, the hours are long, and the job comes with unique challenges and difficulties. Still, superintendents come back to work, reporting high levels of job satisfaction.

(Domenech, 2020, p. 7)

Key Attributes of Effective Superintendents

The Education Consulting Research Analytics group (2010) conducted a review of superintendent evaluation standards and included voices of key educational leaders and institutions such as the American Association of School Administrators. From their analysis, the

ECRA group designed an assessment that outlines leadership practices of effective superintendents. The key attributes that define effective superintendents include the following: Vision and Mission, Core Knowledge Competencies, Instructional Leadership, Community and Relationships, Communication and Collaboration, and Management.

Effective superintendents are described as *visionary leaders* who lead change efforts and cultivate a culture that embraces continuous improvement. A visionary superintendent articulates a clear vision for their stakeholders, develops a shared mission that is aligned with the vision, leads a robust strategic planning process, and sets high expectations for student achievement (ECRA, 2010). The superintendent's *core knowledge* is integral to their effectiveness on the job. Successful superintendents stay abreast of the current trends in education and use research-based practices and frameworks that impact teaching and learning. Superintendents are knowledgeable about state and federal mandates and legal issues related to education (ECRA, 2010).

Instructional leadership is another common practice of effective superintendents (Alsbery & Whitaker, 2007; ECRA Group, 2010; Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021). In recent years, superintendents have been reimagined as the “instructional supervisor” (Donaldson et al., 2021) and effective superintendents align district goals with two primary areas: improving classroom instruction and student achievement (Donaldson et al., 2021; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Instructional leaders facilitate the design of instructional models that consist of research-based practices. They monitor teaching and learning, coaching, and ongoing professional learning. When Miles Nash and Grogan (2021) examined studies about the modern superintendent, they found that those studies reveal that superintendents can indirectly and directly influence teaching and learning. For example, superintendents can indirectly influence instruction through reform efforts, but they can also directly impact learning by appointing, supervising, and setting high

expectations for principals. Effective superintendents have the power to influence teaching and learning, which can result in improved student performance and positive outcomes for students.

Community and relationships are key concerns of effective superintendents, who build trust and establish strong relationships with all stakeholders. They must know their community and values (ECRA, 2010) and understand the different cultures that make up their community (Horsford et al., 2021). Successful leaders demonstrate community leadership by forming partnerships with local businesses and leveraging those partnerships to enhance the educational programs (Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021). Superintendents work with school boards and must navigate community politics in order to meet the demands of the community while also meeting the needs of students (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007).

Effective leadership includes the superintendent's ability to clearly communicate and collaborate with others in a timely and relevant manner. The superintendent is considered the voice of the organization and must possess the skills to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders (ECRA, 2010). Other researchers note that effective superintendents engage all stakeholders in developing district goals. Engaging multiple stakeholder groups to collaboratively set goals is a superintendent's responsibility that correlates with student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Finally, the ECRA group (2010) identified *management* as a leadership practice of effective superintendents. These leaders are responsible for managing their fiscal regulatory (i.e. auditing and compliance), operational, and personnel responsibilities. Strong and efficient systems and structures must be in place manage numerous resources that are present across the districts.

As described above, modern superintendents are responsible for many complex tasks. Their skillset must include their ability to set a vision for success, lead instruction, build relationships, and create effective pathways of communication and collaboration. They must exhibit leadership behaviors and practices to navigate, lead, and change the educational landscape to respond to the needs our students.

Challenges that Superintendents Experience

As superintendents lead their organizations and engage in everyday work, they experience a multitude of challenges. For instance, research suggests that US schools will experience an increase in the number of students of color (Carothers et al., 2019). This shift in student demographics poses a challenge to superintendents in multiple ways. First, superintendents must address the cultural mismatch that exists between students and the teaching force, which draws attention to issues of racism, prejudice, and discrimination and requires educators to confront these issues in their classroom (Chern & Halpin, 2016; St. C. Oates, 2003; Tienken, 2020). Scholars suggest the critical need to have more educators of color because they serve as positive role models for students, help to eliminate negative perceptions of Black and brown children, and enhance the implementation of culturally responsive practices (Carothers et al., 2019).

Since the majority of superintendents identify as white and male and the students they serve are increasingly racially and linguistically diverse (Tienken, 2020), multiple layers of cultural dissonance create a complex situation. As the chief executive officer, the superintendent must design an educational program that serves the diverse needs of their students, ensuring that educational workforce is diverse. Superintendents must also understand how diversity impacts learning, support whole-child learning, enable culturally responsive pedagogy, and encourage

trauma-informed practices (Tienken, 2020). As the chief executive, leaders must recognize the broad range of injustices in education. They must think critically about their practice and exercise their authority to support structures, allocate resources, and commit to equity-based reforms (DeMatthews et al., 2017).

Teacher shortages are another challenge that superintendents face (Carothers et al., 2019; Davidson et al., 2019). There are more available teaching jobs than there are qualified teachers to fill them. More teachers are needed because of a growth in student enrollment and a corresponding attrition of teachers. The shortage also arises from fewer students enrolling in teacher preparation programs. Due to the teacher shortage, schools are hiring personnel that are not qualified for the position. Schools with the least resources and most need are affected by this trend the most (Carothers et al., 2019), and the research shows that unqualified staff are more likely to teach in schools that serve students of color and students who are economically disadvantaged (Carothers et al., 2019; Carver Thomas et al., 2021; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). Although the teacher shortage is a national crisis, district and school-based leaders must determine how to address the existing teacher vacancies in their local schools and make plans as these numbers continue to increase.

Superintendents face other challenges, such as lack of funding, social media concerns, ongoing criticism, stress, and conflicting pressures. One of the most pressing issues is the lack of funding (Björk et al., 2014; Kowalski et al., 2011; Tienken, 2020). The financial health of a school district impacts the work of a superintendent who is challenged with implementing state and federal mandates without adequate funding. Furthermore, superintendents lead schools with a growing number of students with diverse needs that require increased resource allocation (Tienken, 2020). Lamkin (2006) argues that this issue is more of a challenge for rural

superintendents. Without funding, it becomes increasingly difficult for superintendents to ensure that necessary programs are available to meet student's diverse needs (Tienken, 2020).

Safety is critical to the well-being of students and staff and essential to the daily operations of schooling. Safety is a broad category that includes physical, mental, and medical safety for students and staff. Safety has become increasingly difficult due to school shootings, drugs and alcohol, and other issues that present a threat. Students' well-being has always been a priority in our schools; however, after the Sandy Hook shooting, superintendents must prepare for the worst (Wright & Papa, 2020). Most recently, Covid-19 and the status of the pandemic have been a critical safety challenge. The uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic has led superintendents to prepare for school closings and remote learning (Gonzalez, 2021). In a study of 36 Virginia superintendents, Cash et al. (2022) investigated the challenges and opportunities that the superintendents experienced as they led throughout the pandemic. They expressed dire concerns for student and staff safety but specifically noted that addressing the social and emotional needs of their students was a priority. They exercised flexibility and agility to respond to the needs of both students and staff. Using the guidance of local, state, and healthcare officials, superintendents also made changes to the school environment and developed protocols to ensure the safety of students and staff (Gonzalez, 2021).

Wright and Papa (2020) also noted that one of the challenges for superintendents is ongoing criticism from various parties. Stakeholder expectations, at times, are unrealistic and do not consider factors such as increased accountability and changes in assessments. Community expectations vary across school districts, as do financial support and staffing. The variance puts leaders of small districts at a disadvantage when they lack access to the same resources as other districts (Lamkin, 2006; Wright & Papa, 2020). As superintendents make daily decisions, the

school community may scrutinize them without considering other factors (Wright & Papa, 2020). Donaldson et al. (2021) also state that the current pressures that superintendents endure sometimes conflict. As superintendents manage district operations and implement policy, outside forces shape and influence their decisions. Similarly, DeMatthews et al. (2017) state:

Superintendents' power is shaped by social, political, and economic forces stemming from school board and community politics, state and federal education policies, financial concerns, unequal power dynamics between communities, and influential constituents who disagree or oppose reforms based on their interests and ideologies. (p. 4)

When community groups have competing interests, the superintendent will inevitably make unpopular decisions (DeMatthews et al., 2017) and must know how to navigate the consequences of those decisions. Although the superintendent position is not on the top-ten lists of most stressful jobs (Tienken, 2020), the position comes with significant stress and demands from the board, community, and educators (Alsburly & Whitaker, 2007; Donaldson et al., 2021; Lamkin, 2006; Tienken, 2020). Lamkin (2006) suggested that because of the superintendency's complexity, many school and district-level leaders who might be eligible to become superintendents are uninterested in the position.

Superintendents Leading for Social Justice

Many educational leadership scholars have defined the concept of social justice and described the core tenets of social justice leadership. Despite subtle nuances across definitions, each scholar's description of leading for social justice encompasses principles of human rights, equity, equality, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness (Newcomb & Mansfield, 2014; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). According to DeMatthews et al. (2017), "Social justice leadership is broadly aimed toward creating an inclusive approach to challenging dominant beliefs, co-constructing

new and empowering narratives, advocating for comprehensive change, and publicly engaging in ongoing candid discussions about race, ethnicity, social class, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and other marginalization conditions” (p. 6).

In the UCEA Voices project, Alsbury and Whitaker (2007) conducted a 4-year study that examined how superintendents perceive accountability, democratic voice, and social justice. These scholars found that superintendents consistently defined social justice in vague terms and expressed that they wanted “what was best for kids” (p. 169). Some superintendents believed the loose definition of social justice was problematic because it helped leaders evade real conversations that can lead to equity.

Superintendents who lead for social justice must understand power and influence regarding marginalized communities and student populations (DeMatthews et al., 2017). In addition, situational awareness and advocacy must be used in tandem. The merging of these two skills contributes to a superintendent’s praxis for social justice. DeMatthews et al. (2017) explained that praxis is “an iterative and ongoing process where individual and/or community/organizational-based learning instigates action and subsequent reflection” (p. 9). In their study, the El Paso Independent School District superintendent used dual language education to promote social justice. DeMatthews et al. (2017) described how Superintendent Cabrera leveraged parent voices to implement the district-wide dual language program. He also engaged the school board and other community leaders by telling stories that captured how emergent bilingual students have been historically marginalized and how speaking both English and Spanish can be considered an asset by future employers. Superintendent Cabrera is an example of how leaders can engage in praxis for social justice by simultaneously activating their situational awareness and advocacy skills.

In Dailey's (2015) autoethnographic account of her superintendency, she used counter stories as a strategy to lead for social justice. Accordingly, she used her own story and the perspectives of the African American community to address issues of social justice. She asserted that superintendents can lead social justice work by helping their staff manage and embrace the paradigm shift from traditional to culturally relevant pedagogy. Another strategy that social-justice-oriented leaders and activists use to advance social justice is to build networks and a coalition of people to support the cause. Superintendents cannot be on the frontlines of every battle. For example, Superintendent Cabrera in the DeMatthews et al. study (2017) empowered another principal to influence the other principals that were resistant to change. DeMatthews et al. (2017) noted that superintendents are in the unique position to seek reform through collaboration, communication, and community engagement. The superintendent has access to all stakeholders including, but not limited to, board members, building level leaders, and community members.

There are many challenges that leaders face when seeking social justice in their schools and districts. In Garza's (2008) study, the superintendents described challenges with stakeholders such as the board of education members, district staff, and principals. The superintendent's narrative demonstrates the difficulty of advancing equity in a small, rural district. Leaders seek to make decisions in students' best interest; however, adults can create a hostile environment when they challenge the norm. Some of the benefits of working in a small district (i.e., relationships) also served as limitations.

As a superintendent seeks social justice, there is potential for ongoing conflict and controversy because challenging norms may result in negative consequences for school leaders (Alston, 2005; DeMatthews et al., 2017). DeMatthews et al. (2017) explain that social justice

activists may encounter adversity in their personal and work life, and superintendents must recognize that overt activism can be risky. Superintendents must decide if it is best to engage in more visible, explicit actions or implicit forms of advocacy. Alston (2005) uses the term ‘tempered radicalism’ to describe how African American women lead for social justice. As Black women navigate power differentials in their environment, they use their power to remove oppressive structures. Effective Black female superintendents demonstrate their commitment to their organization and are willing to challenge the norms.

Summary

The teacher shortage crisis, funding, safety, and criticism are issues that impact superintendents; however, the 2020 AASA study identifies personnel management, conflict management, and board relations as significant problems that also consume the superintendent’s time. The superintendency is complex and challenging. Although there are many obstacles to overcome, the superintendent is uniquely positioned to address those challenges and meet the demands of a district’s stakeholders.

Black Women Superintendents

Thus far, in my literature review, I have provided an overview of the superintendency. Although the existing research primarily represents the white male perspective, a growing body of research captures the unique experiences of Black women who have become superintendents. Discourse about Black women superintendents reveals that gender, race, and class play a critical role in their experiences (Horsford et al., 2021; Stanley, 2009). The literature on Black female superintendents reveals how African American women have contributed to education and how they exhibit success in the face of adversity. In this section, I discuss the history of African American women as educational leaders and the experiences of Black women superintendents.

Historical Contributions of African American Women as Educational Leaders

The early struggles to gain access to, and control of, their own education can be seen in the collective and individual efforts of many African Americans who articulated a philosophy of Black education ... (Tillman, 2009, p. X)

Though today Black females are underrepresented in educational leadership and scholarship, records show they were historically instrumental in education, specifically with educating the Black community. Black women have created ways to educate Black students even when it was illegal. For example, some Black students attended school at midnight to learn to read and write. By the early 1900s, Black women were educated in formal school settings, an overwhelming majority of the Black teaching force (Alston, 2005). An article written in 1904 noted the positive impact that African American women had on the education of Black children. The article revealed that African American women contributed \$14 million to education, and educated more than 25,000 Black teachers (Alston, 2000). National Black female leaders such as Fannie Jackson Coppin, Lucy Laney, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and Fannie Barrier Williams are notable African American women who taught in and led segregated elementary schools (Alston, 2000). Moreover, these leaders educated and produced many Black doctors, lawyers, and teachers (Tillman, 2009), thus demonstrating how Black women have had a major impact in education.

In the early 20th century, Jeanes Supervisors emerged in the rural southern states to improve schooling and educational conditions. Jeanes Supervisors are often compared to our modern-day African American women superintendents (Horsford et al., 2021). In 1907, a Philadelphia philanthropist, Anna T. Jeanes, was committed to improving rural Black communities and donated \$1 million to fund education reform efforts. Eighty percent of the

Jeanes Supervisors were college-educated Black women who served as teachers, principals, and Black school system leaders (Horsford et al., 2021). They were de facto superintendents who performed the same duties, yet the local White male superintendent directly supervised them. The Jeanes Supervisors made significant impact on the Black community, but many lost their leadership positions after the Supreme Court ruled that “separate is inherently unequal” in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954. The desegregation efforts that resulted roughly a decade after the *Brown* decision eliminated not only the Jeanes Supervisors but significantly decreased the number of all African American men and women who served as teachers and administrators (Alston, 2005; Angel et al., 2013; Grooms et al., 2021; Horsford et al., 2021; Wilkerson & Wilson, 2017; Wiley et al., 2017). Lyons and Chelsey stated, “A whole generation of Black educators was lost” (as cited in Wiley et al., 2017, p. 18).

Despite the loss of African American educators in the South due to desegregation, the legacy of Black leaders in education continues to live on. In a study of eight African American superintendents who were educated in segregated Black schools, Horsford (2009) found that the participants believed they received a high-quality education thanks to the excellent Black teachers and leaders that served their schools. Dr. Steele, one of the Black superintendents in the study, expressed that he had “the best teachers you could find” (p. 70) because the Black teachers and community believed in them (Horsford, 2009). The legacy of Black school leaders and the impact they had on Black children are told through our present-day Black leaders.

Though African American women have endured struggles since slavery and through desegregation, they have continued to defy the odds and resist oppression (Jackson, 1999). Many Black female educational pioneers have paved the way for the current African American women superintendents. Black women such as Velma Dolphin Ashley, the first Black woman

superintendent in the Boley, Oklahoma school district, and Barbara Sizemore, the first African American woman to lead a school district in a large major city, were true pioneers (Horsford et al., 2021). Jackson (1999) also highlighted the work of Dr. Rosa Smith, the first Black woman named Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators. Also, he noted that many other unknown African American women have been trailblazers in education.

The First Black Superintendents After *Brown*

Historically, the numbers of Black superintendents have been small in comparison to their white counterparts. In 1970, Charles Moody conducted one of the first major studies of Black superintendents. The first challenging task was to compile a list of current Black superintendents. After the Black Caucus at the American Association of School Administration meeting in 1969, along with subsequent meetings, Dr. Moody compiled a list of 21 Black superintendents to participate in the study. He did not identify whether the participants were Black males or females; however, Moody shared several key findings. He discovered that most superintendents resided east of the Mississippi and were appointed to their positions because the school districts were considered unfavorable and had a declining budget. In addition, the majority of student population and the community were Black, while in 14 of the 21 school districts, the school board was majority Black. During 5 years (1965–1970), 14 superintendents diversified the teaching force and increased the number of African American teachers in their schools (Moody, 1971).

Black superintendents have historically experienced the “Leading while Black” phenomenon. Under this conception, African American leaders were viewed as the “Messiah” by the Black community in pursuit of equity, equality, and justice (Horsford et al., 2021). Tillman (2009) also noted that Black superintendents were called on to represent the entire race and were

expected to be all things to all people. These same leaders also served as the “scapegoat” for white stakeholders who viewed them as incompetent and doubted their leadership abilities (Horsford et al., 2021). Through his groundbreaking study, Charles Moody (1971) generated new knowledge about Black superintendents and identified challenges facing aspiring Black superintendents. Importantly, when “Leading while Black,” Black superintendents are expected to identify with the experience of white colleagues yet simultaneously overcome the challenges unique to the Black standpoint and fulfill their commitment to the African American community (Horsford et al., 2021).

Characteristics of Black Women Superintendents

Emerging scholarship regarding Black women superintendents has helped identify key characteristics. Revere’s (1987) classic study examined 29 superintendents across the United States to generate a profile of African American women leaders. The study’s findings revealed that Black female leaders ranged from 36 to 45 and with 20–30 years of educational experience. All participants began as classroom teachers, but there was no common pathway to the superintendency (Revere, 1987). Regardless of race, women superintendents spend more time as classroom teachers than their male counterparts (Robinson et al., 2017) and often remain in the classroom for 12 to 20 years (Alston, 2005). Revere’s (1987) findings also revealed that Black females held educational degrees higher than their white counterparts during the 1984–1985 school year. She identified areas that contributed to these Black women’s success and helped advance their careers. First, the participants demonstrated competence in their jobs. They knew about school operations and demonstrated strong organizational skills and the ability to take risks. The African American women superintendents were industrious, strong-willed, and resilient.

Following Revere's study, Jackson (1999) conducted a study of 41 African American superintendents who were current or retired administrators. Findings from this study revealed that the administrators had support and experiences that prepared them for leadership, believed they were making a difference, and believed the superintendency was like "life in a fishbowl" (p. 142). Despite public misconceptions and apprehensions about their preparedness, Black women superintendents were well-prepared for the position, according to Revere (1987) and Jackson (1999). Most leaders have attained the highest degree and have had robust experience in the field and strong community connections (Jackson, 1999). In more recent times, African American women superintendents are typically in their late 40s and early 50s, have spent 12–20 years as teachers in the classroom, and were more likely to lead schools and districts that served people of color (Alston, 2005; Angel et al., 2013; Horsford et al., 2021). These scholars have also argued for more reliable data on women superintendents.

Factors Contributing to Success

Although the research literature is limited, some scholars have identified specific factors contributing to Black superintendents' success and commonalities of their personal backgrounds. In a phenomenological study of eight Black women superintendents in Texas, Wiley et al. (2017) investigated the challenges, supports, and personal experiences that contributed to their journey to the superintendency. The participants uniformly expressed their motivating desire to become superintendents was to impact students, teachers, community, and future administrators. The superintendents shared their passion for students and teachers throughout their journey to the superintendency (Wiley et al., 2017). Similarly, Jackson (1999) and Alston (2005) reported that African American women superintendents clearly articulated their commitment to positively influencing students. Tillman and Cochran (2000) suggest that many women of color create an

urgency to support children of color by resisting the systems created to oppress them. They position themselves to serve as activists in the school and community. Black female leaders exhibit a strong sense of efficacy, believe they can lead effectively, and commit to their mission. Women in superintendent roles exude confidence and work diligently towards their goals (Alston, 2005; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). African American women superintendents are servant leaders with a strong sense of efficacy and use their unyielding faith and spirituality to strive for excellence (Alston, 2005).

As I described earlier in this chapter, the superintendency is a complex socio-political position in which the leader must serve all of the stakeholders throughout the community. Brown (2014) conducted a study of eight African American superintendents who shared their narratives and highlighted the importance of managing the socio-politics of the position. Successful African American superintendents demonstrate strength, perseverance, and resiliency as they encounter daily challenges and obstacles unique to Black women (Revere, 1987; Tillman & Cochran, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017). For instance, in a study of six women superintendents, Katz (2012) highlighted one African American female superintendent who became the first woman and person of color to lead in a small, suburban school district. Katz (2012) revealed how the superintendent embarked on uncharted territory or “border crossing” to lead for social justice and build a democratic community. She educated and sensitized her staff to identify existing practices that excluded students and families. Instead, she engaged her stakeholders to find solutions to promote family engagement, such as developing a networking process for connecting better with the district’s Korean families.

Another factor contributing to a Black woman superintendent’s success is her ability or willingness to take risks (Brown, 2014; Goines-Harris, 2020). In terms of recruitment and

retention, one superintendent in Brown's study stated, "If you are afraid to reach out to folks or if you are afraid to take no for an answer, if you are afraid to be denied, and if you are afraid of being declined then this job is not for you" (p. 584). Other superintendents argued that Black women superintendents must prepare to take calculated risks. When the need arises, you must weigh the pros and cons and be willing to make tough decisions. Black women do not maintain their position by playing it safe; taking calculated risks helps to sustain them in the profession (Goines-Harris, 2020)

While not all Black female leaders have identical backgrounds and experiences, many scholars noted similarities in African American women superintendents' backgrounds. For example, Black women superintendents attribute their success to their faith and spirituality (Alston, 2005; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Black women's spirituality helps to sustain them in difficult situations. Alston (2005) stated,

For many of these superintendents, spirituality is the foundation that grounds them as they contend with each day's struggles. It is also important to note that the lived experiences of Black women superintendents, just simply because they are Black and females, have prepared them to overcome some challenges that they may face in the superintendency. (p. 682)

In summary, researchers have found commonalities that contribute to Black women superintendents' success. Scholars highlight characteristics such their commitment to serving all students, perseverance, and resiliency, ability to take risks, and their faith as pertinent factors that contribute to their success.

Challenges that African American Women Superintendents Experience

Black women in leadership experience what Barnes (2017) described as a concrete ceiling, a term that expresses the barriers that stifle their mobility in the workforce (Barnes, 2017; Reed, 2012). White men hold the highest leadership positions, which means they have the money and power. The concrete ceiling is a metaphor to represent the greater obstacles that Black women face due to their race and gender. Black women leaders have unique personal and professional experiences where they are not seen or heard.

The dominant culture and ideologies pressure African American women to conform to the status quo. Brown (2014) explained that African American women superintendents functioning in a White male-dominated society are forced to wear “masks” (p. 574), and Black women cannot reveal their true selves. The masks represent conformity and how Black women’s identity and voice are suppressed. Too often, these leaders must follow unwritten rules and “cultural codes” (p. 574) to fit into a workspace not designed for them. Brown advocates for Black women leaders to find ways to remove those masks so they are liberated and can truly experience freedom.

Unlike their white counterparts, Black females must confront negative stereotypes about being Black (Barnes, 2017; Stanley, 2009). The negative perception that others have of African American women becomes a barrier to their success as superintendents (Alston, 2005; Barnes, 2017; Brown, 2014; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Black women’s perceptions are significantly different from the traditional perceptions of leadership. Negative images of Black women in subservient roles influence how African American women are seen today. Black women have attempted to overcome these challenges by proving their credibility (Stanley, 2009). Furthermore, a research study of Black women in the corporate sector found that Black females

experience similar barriers to success in that arena. Negative stereotypes, challenging their authority, and questioning their credibility were among the challenges Black women leaders faced in companies (Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

African American women experience other challenges in leadership and are forced to navigate double standards. If African American women communicate directly and assertively, they are perceived as confrontational. It is acceptable and admired when men are assertive; however, there is a double standard for women (Chin et al., 2011). African American women often feel isolated and like an outsider. They grapple with whether to fit in or remain isolated, but fitting in can feel like they are compromising who they are (Barnes, 2017).

Another challenge that African American superintendents experience is the struggle to integrate the role and identity of being an African American and a superintendent. Through systematic journaling while she served as a superintendent, Dailey (2015) described her lived experience after one of her African American principals was upset by the stereotypical and negative figures (a pickaninny caricature) displayed at one of the community schools. The account of this event signifies the complexity and challenge of African American women superintendents. Dailey (2015) stated,

I feel like two people at this moment. One is the superintendent following the process to ensure community decisions are addressed respectfully, and the other is an African American who shares the pain of another African American hurt by the figures being allowed to stay up. (p. 11)

In the end, the superintendent identified a need to allow for counter stories to elevate the voices of people of color and facilitated a way to make that occur.

Other research identifies challenges that hinder African American women's accession to the superintendency and complicate their superintendent's tenure. Angel et al. (2013) conducted a study of 10 African American women leaders who were in a position to seek the superintendency. Using a Black Feminist framework, the authors found that participants experienced challenges in external factors such as oppressive experiences, uncertainty of selection procedures, and lack of access to network supports. Goines-Harris (2020) conducted a mixed methods study to identify the perceived barriers of three African American superintendents from North and South Carolina. The study's findings were consistent with those of Angel et al. (2013).

Harris (2020) also conducted a study that explored how five African American women superintendents attained and held their positions. These leaders discussed the pressures of working twice as hard as their white and male counterparts to prove themselves and be deemed worthy of the position. The superintendents discussed the need to prepare and get it right the first time because Black women are not afforded the opportunity for a do-over. The study's findings emphasized a critical need for mentors. One superintendent shared how she only had white male mentors early in her career because she did not have access to Black women mentors. The superintendents acknowledged the lack of networking and mentorship as challenges that complicated their work as Black women leaders.

Support and Mentoring

Mentoring can provide support to all educators. Hill and Ragland (as cited in Tillman & Cochran, 2000) stated that to mentor is to guide, train, and support others who lack knowledge and experience. In addition, the scholars suggest that mentors assist with learning the organization's nuances. Aspiring superintendents generally enroll in a university to earn a

doctorate and to gain the knowledge and skills needed to lead effectively. Many women expressed that “true learning” occurred within their professional experience and through the guidance of their mentors (Brown, 2014). Several scholars suggest that mentoring is a critical aspect of the recruitment and retention of superintendents and contributes to their overall success (Alston, 2000; Brown, 2014; Goines-Harris, 2020; Tillman & Cochran, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017). It is an expectation for teachers to receive ongoing coaching and support; however, mentorship for superintendents, both informal and formal, is limited.

In her narrative study of eight African American women from the Southeastern region of the United States, Brown (2014) sought to address issues of recruitment and retention of public school superintendents. Many of the Black superintendents attributed their learning and growth to the support of a mentor. One superintendent in this study stated, “Be intentional about who you’re spending your time with and know what you hope to gain from spending that time” (Brown, 2014, p. 582). Superintendents in Goines-Harris’ (2020) study also acknowledged the importance of networking and mentorship. Participants stated that successful networking was critical to their success and capacity-building.

Mentors can come from a variety of different sources, including but not limited to current and retired superintendents and university faculty. Mentors support novice superintendents by helping them leverage the social and political resources within the organization, navigate the challenges of bureaucracy, make sound budget decisions, and learn about the realities of the superintendency (Brown, 2014; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). In addition, Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010) conducted a qualitative study of 270 superintendents residing in various states across the United States. They found that Black women superintendents noted that the “black church” was influential to their leadership development. The superintendents also

reported that their mentors included parents, teachers, professors, administrators, superintendents, and political figures. They expressed that these mentors helped to address the challenges they faced and with advancing their careers. Many of the women stated that the support of male mentor leaders contributed to their success as a superintendent. Alston (2000) suggested that educational leadership programs and other organizations can design formal mentoring programs to retain Black women superintendents. Ongoing support and mentoring are essential for helping develop and support Black women superintendents.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Black Feminist Theory

As I noted in Chapter I, Intersectionality and Black Feminist Theory serve as the theoretical framework for my study. I begin this section by explaining Intersectionality.

Intersectionality

For decades, scholars have discussed the intersections of race, gender, class, and other marginalized identities in society. Race is a socially constructed term used to categorize people by their differences. Similarly, gender is also a social construct (Stanley, 2009). Bell and Nkomo (2001) state that gender is a “set of assumptions and beliefs on both individual and societal levels that affect the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, resources, and treatment of women” (as cited in Stanley, 2009, p. 16). African American women endure both gender and race discrimination (Alston, 2005; Angel et al., 2013; Barnes, 2017; Brown, 2014; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 2020; Tillman & Cochran, 2000); however, Black women’s experiences are often viewed from a singular standpoint. In some ways, Black women can relate to the feminist movement; however, the feminist agenda does not fully respond to the needs of Black women since feminist theories are constructed through the viewpoint of white women. Feminism does not acknowledge that white women are afforded privileges not granted to women of color;

therefore, their views do not respond to the needs of Black women (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Horsford, 2012).

In her impromptu speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” Sojourner Truth boldly challenged systems of oppression that marginalized Black women. Many scholars referenced Sojourner Truth’s speech because her message highlighted the complexity of race and gender and how Black women were excluded from other social justice movements (Collins, 2000; Horsford, 2012). In addition, Black women identify with the Black standpoint, yet, gender-based issues are not considered in this space (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 2020). Neither the Black nor feminist standpoint alone captures the lived experiences of Black women. They both fail to acknowledge the uniqueness and complexity of being Black and female. Furthermore, Crenshaw (1989) explained that Black women are oppressed similarly to women and the Black community; however, the double discrimination disproportionately impacts Black women more than one marginalizing condition. Anti-racist and feminist discourse have marginalized Black women by not recognizing the multiple challenges that Black women endure (Horsford, 2009).

A Black woman is marginalized as a person of color and as a woman; however, the intersections of both identities create a new experience to navigating the white, male-dominated society. Discrimination from multiple intersecting identities also impacts Black women in the educational and private business sectors. Terms such as “double jeopardy” (Brown, 2014), “double minority” (Wiley et al., 2017), “double whammy (Angel et al., 2013), and “multiple jeopardies” (Horsford et al., 2021) are often used to describe the Intersectionality of race and gender for Black women leaders. Consequently, Black women must be mindful of how others perceive them. They cannot be perceived as “too Black” and “too female” (Wiley et al., 2017).

Scholars argue that we must examine the intersections of race and gender to understand the lived experiences of Black women (Alston, 2005; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 2020; Horsford, 2009), and specifically Black women superintendents (Alston, 2005; Horsford, 2009; Horsford et al., 2021). In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term “Intersectionality.” In her presentation at the 2020 Makers conference, she defined Intersectionality as “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups” (Crenshaw, 2020, 2:03). She explained that the term emerged as a way to educate judges on how the discrimination for Black women was different than it is for Black men and white women (Crenshaw, 2020). The intersection of race and gender shapes the experiences of Black women leaders. Intersectionality is how multiple identities (race, gender, and class) are overlapped to either gain or limit power (Alston, 2005) and how the intersection of these identities shapes our social realities (Stanley, 2009). Similarly, Collins (2000) defined Intersectionality as the “analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women” (p. 299). Intersectionality serves as a prism or framework for understanding the problems that arise through the convergence of race, gender, and other identities (Crenshaw, 2020).

Several contemporary African American educational leadership scholars have contributed to the scholarship on Intersectionality. Horsford and Tillman (2012) highlighted the contributions of several African American women scholars in examining how identities inform their leadership and the experiences of others. In her synthesis of existing research, Horsford (2012) explored how the intersection of race and gender influenced Black women’s ability to use bridge

leadership in multiple contexts and why bridge leadership is critical to producing positive outcomes for diverse school communities. She defined bridge leadership as “how the intersection of race and gender as experienced by the Black women leader has resulted in her serving as a bridge for others, to others, and between others in oppressive and discriminatory contexts over time” (p. 17). These bridge leaders engaged in grassroots efforts to dismantle oppressive structures and advance educational equity.

Black Feminist Thought

African American women face challenges and barriers that are unique compared to other social groups. We live in a country that promises democracy, equality, and social justice. Yet, this promise has not been delivered to African American women. Since the beginning of slavery, African American women had to navigate oppressive structures in the United States. Collins (2009) states, “Oppression describes any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (p. 4). It is the Intersectionality of gender, race, and class that shapes Black women’s experiences and that leads to Black feminism. We can attribute contemporary Black feminism to many Black women, known and unknown, for their continued fight for survival and liberation. Women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell are Black activists who were aware of how their sexual and racial identity uniquely impacted their lives. Their personal struggles and sacrifices have led the way for African American women today (Black Feminist Statement, 2014). This level of knowledge and consciousness serves to empower Black women.

Black women feminists, like Maria Stewart, believed in the power of community for activism and self-determination. Stewart urged Black people to resist slavery and oppression. As

an abolitionist and an advocate for women's rights, Stewart called upon us to not simply identify the causes of oppression but to define self-reliance and independence for ourselves. She charged Black women to be bold, fearless, and undaunted. Her contributions as a Black woman intellectual influenced the Black Feminist movement and Black Feminist Thought as a critical social theory (Collins, 2000). As we acknowledge Stewart's intellect and brilliance and her legacy as a Black woman activist, the question remains: Why are African American women still invisible? Collins (2009) argues that suppressing Black feminist ideas allows the dominant culture to remain in power and maintain social inequalities. Nevertheless, Black women continue to engage in efforts to resist oppression.

In the late 1960s, Black feminism received more attention after the second wave of the feminist movement. Black women participated in the beginning of the feminist movement; however, racism and elitism excluded them. In response, Black feminists created a separate group called the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). Black feminist politics were connected to other Black liberation movements (civil rights, Black Nationalism, Black Panthers). Yet, it did not capture Black women's social and political needs (Black Feminist Statement, 2014). The convergence of gender, class, and race continues to set the needs of African American women apart from others.

Black Feminist Thought, a critical social theory, acknowledges the unique status of African American women. As described by Collins (2000), "For African American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity" (p. 9). Black women construct knowledge and practices to oppose and resist social and economic

injustices. The beauty of Black Feminist Thought is that knowledge can be expressed through song, poetry, or other expressions of art in addition to traditional academic scholarship.

Within the matrix of domination, Collins also provided a historical overview of how Black women have been objectified based on their intersecting identities. Barbara Christian, a Black feminist critic (as cited in Collins, 2000), argued that Black women have been defined as our society's "other." The "other," in a binary way of thinking, is inferior to what is considered mainstream, and the dominant group constructs their narrative. "As the Others, U.S. Blacks are assigned all of the negative characteristics opposite and inferior to those reserved for Whites" (Collins, 2000, p. 89). Taken together, the intersections of being Black and female position Black women lower on the social ladder.

Collins (2000) also explained how Black womanhood has been linked to controlling images: the mammy, matriarch, welfare woman, Black lady, and the jezebel. Each of these derogatory images, constructed by the white hegemony, perpetuates the subordination of African American women. The first image constructed to describe Black women was the mammy. The mammy was a hardworking, obedient woman who was the primary caregiver for the white family. No matter how much the white family liked her, she was considered a servant. The mammy's role was to prepare her own children to serve in mammy-like, subservient roles, just as the mammy herself served the children of whites.

The next image assigned to Black women was the matriarch. Unlike the mammy, who was considered the good Black mother, the matriarch was portrayed as the overly aggressive Black woman because she resisted the mammy image. In addition, she dominated Black men, so she was not married or wanted by men. The welfare mother was another image constructed by whites to describe African American women as mothers who were lazy, who did not take care of

their children, and who were content with living a life on welfare. The matriarch and the welfare mother were blamed for their child's failure. The next controlling image, the Black lady, had characteristics similar to those of the mammy and matriarch. The Black lady was a hard-working, educated, middle-class Black woman; however, she was often viewed as less feminine because she was assertive and able to compete with men. Finally, the jezebel (or the contemporary "hoochie mama") represents Black women as overtly and excessively sexual and serves as a rationale for sexual assaults by white men. In addition to serving the interests of white men, the image of the modern-day Jezebel permeates Black popular culture and is further normalized (Collins, 2000).

In her work, Collins (2000) identifies how these five controlling images provide ideological justification for African American women's historical and ongoing oppression. When Black women recognize that systems of inequality place them at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they are willing to confront "the matrix of domination in the United States" (Collins, 2000, p. 84).

As stated earlier, the intersection of race and gender work together to produce injustices for Black women. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) extends the discourse on Intersectionality to include the "matrix of domination" permeating our society. The matrix of domination examines different forms of oppression and how they intersect, but it also includes how power is organized. The matrix is an organization of power that consists of four interrelated domains of power—structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. The structural (social institutions), disciplinary (organizational practices), hegemonic (dominant group ideologies), and interpersonal (everyday discriminatory practices) domains of power simultaneously work together to deepen the marginalization and exclusion of Black women.

Summary

As I previously stated, the purpose of Black Feminist Thought is to empower Black women to dismantle systems of oppression and serve as activists for social justice. Historically, Black women have been marginalized based on gender, race, and class. The intersections of these identities have shaped Black women's social realities and perspectives, both individually and collectively. Black Feminist Thought is a theoretical framework that uses the concept of Intersectionality and matrix of domination to explain the racist and sexist forces that impact their lives. Black women's understanding of these concepts helped build African American women's knowledge and consciousness of how interlocking oppressions impact their lived experiences and Black women as a group (Collins, 2000).

Conclusion

As I have explored African American women superintendents, it is apparent that Black women's experiences are personally and professionally different from those of their white and male counterparts. Their lived experiences shape their lens. Beyond the traditional challenges of a superintendent, African American women leaders must navigate issues of race, gender, and class as they lead in district-level positions. These executives face additional internal and external factors, such as a lack of mentors, exclusion from the good old boy club, and ongoing dissension between living in two different worlds. These barriers create added stress and additional pressure. These factors present a great challenge for African American women superintendents but also may position these women to have a greater influence on the success of all students, teachers, and the community.

There is a sense of urgency to understand African American women superintendents' journey and ongoing experiences as they lead their district communities. In my study to

understand the lived experiences of Black women educational leaders, I seek to design portraits of three African American superintendents that capture and reveal their lived experiences. My study seeks to understand how African American women superintendents describe their approach to leadership, how they talk about the perceived challenges and successes, how intersections of race, gender, and class collectively influence their leadership, and what attributes and supports they perceive as necessary to their leadership.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

To augment the growing body of literature on Black female superintendents (Alston, 2000, 2005; Brown, 2014; Goins-Harris, 2020; Horsford, 2012; Horsford et al., 2021; Jackson, 1999; Revere, 1987; Tillman & Cochran, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017), the purpose of my study is to understand the lived experiences of African American women superintendents serving in the PK-12 public school setting. In this chapter, I state the primary research question and the accompanying sub-questions. I also describe the methodology, setting, sample population, and data collection methods I used to conduct the research.

Research Questions

I sought to better understand the lived experiences of African American women superintendents. The following research sub-questions also guided the study:

1. How do African American women superintendents describe how they lead?
2. How do African American women superintendents speak about the challenges they encounter?
3. What attributes and supports do African American women superintendents perceive as contributing to their success?
4. How do African American women superintendents perceive their identities (race and gender) have influenced their lived experiences as superintendents?

These research questions helped to reveal Black female superintendents' beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The information collected in this study helped to create portraits that provide detailed, qualitative descriptions of their lived experiences.

Description of Methodology

Using a qualitative research approach is necessary and critical to meeting the demands of this study's inquiry. Qualitative researchers often investigate research problems that cannot be addressed through quantitative measures. This type of inquiry enhances the world of research (Mertens, 2009).

Qualitative research seeks to describe, explain, or investigate a specific phenomenon. In this study, my focus is African American women superintendents. Constructing knowledge about the lived experiences of Black females can be approached in various ways. Patton (2015) identifies the following seven ways that qualitative inquiry constructs knowledge:

- illuminating meaning
- studying how things work
- capturing stories to understand people's experiences and perspectives
- elucidating how systems function and their consequences for people's lives
- understanding context: how and why it matters
- identifying unanticipated consequences
- making case comparisons to discover important patterns and themes across cases

In this study, I used the qualitative portraiture approach as my inquiry method. I developed rich, thick, and vivid descriptions of three Black female superintendents and their lived experiences through this approach. The terms artist/portraitist and actors are commonly used to describe the researcher and the participants/subjects, respectively (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann-Davis, 1997). The final product is an artistic representation of their narratives, also described as a "painting with words" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 4). In the following sections, I define portraiture and describe how I use it in this study.

Portraiture

Portraiture, as described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis, is qualitative research that joins both aesthetics and empiricism to capture the stories of individual people or organizations. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) acknowledged that portraiture has been influenced by several artists and philosophers such as Henri Rousseau, William James, John Dewey, and W.E.B Dubois. During their time, these artists/scholars boldly crossed the boundaries of the fine arts and science, presenting a different school of thought. In the *Art and Science of Portraiture*, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis define portraiture as:

In summary, portraiture is a method framed by the tradition and values of the phenomenological paradigm, sharing many of the techniques, standards, and goals of ethnography. But it pushes against the constraints of those traditions and practices in its explicit effort to combine empirical and aesthetic description, in its focus on the convergence of narrative and analysis, in its goal of speaking to broader audiences beyond the academy (thus linking inquiry to public discourse and social transformation), in its standard of authenticity rather than reliability and validity (the traditional standards of quantitative and qualitative inquiry), and in its explicit recognition of the use of the self as the primary research instruction for documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of the people and the cultures being studied. (pp. 13–14)

The researcher, also identified as the *self of the portrait*, is more visibly present in portraiture than other modes of inquiry and is seen as “an instrument of inquiry” (p. 13) that skillfully weaves the portrait together. The intentionality of the researcher is a salient feature of portraiture that also distinguishes this methodology from other methodological approaches. The portraitist must demonstrate awareness of their identity, background, and predispositions in

relation to the actors and counterbalance these factors with rigorous skepticism and critique (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann-Davis, 1997). The success of the research is dependent on the level of intentionality and scrutiny the portraitists bring to the study.

Portraiture consists of five essential elements: context, voice, relationships, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole to blend art and science fluidly. There are several aspects of context that researchers use to shape the creation of the portrait. The internal context depicts a description of the physical setting, the personal context reveals the researcher's perspective and experience, and the historical context refers to the participant's beliefs, values, and ideologies. *Context* also includes central metaphors that are commonly used and how the participants shape their own context. These contextual factors, taken together, influence the development of the rich portraits that will emerge from this study (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann-Davis, 1997).

The second element characteristic of portraiture is *voice*. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann-Davis (1997) explain, "Voice is the individualistic impression to the researcher on the portrait. It is therefore omnipresent, ubiquitous, and most difficult to isolate in our disassembly of the methodology of portraiture" (p. 106). Voice can be demonstrated in various ways—as a witness, through interpretation, as an autobiography, and in some instances as a group voice. The voice of the portraitist appears in all aspects of the study; however, it should not overshadow the voice of the actors. The construction of the portraits relies on the voice of the portraitist and actors (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann-Davis, 1997). In this study, I will utilize my voice and the actor's voice to create a harmonious portrait that reflects the narrative of the participant. In order to do this, I will constantly assess the influence of my voice in developing and retelling the story of the three Black women superintendents that are being studied.

Another element that is commensurate with portraiture is relationships. In other forms of research, the researchers distance themselves from the participants; however, in portraiture, the researcher forges relationships with the actors from the initial to the final stages of the research study. The quality of the relationship is shaped by the frequency and length of time spent with the participants, personalities, and the chemistry that develops between the artist and actors, and communicating the goal to search for goodness within the study. Stronger and more intimate relationships will yield more in-depth and richer descriptions (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann-Davis, 1997).

Emergent themes is the fourth element that is found in portraiture. The search for themes and patterns is an empirical process where the researcher organizes, analyzes, and synthesizes the data. Through this iterative process, the researcher constructs meaning by listening for repetitive refrains, for metaphors or expressions that depict the actors' experiences, and for ritual themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann-Davis, 1997).

Finally, portraiture is characterized by the aesthetic whole. The previous elements—context, voice, relationships, and emergent themes—do not exist in isolation. These elements work together to create the aesthetic whole. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann-Davis (1997) simplified the roles of these elements and described how they work together using the following quilting metaphor:

Context functions as the underlying cloth on which the design is sewn, emergent themes are revealed as the shapes that will be joined together, voice is seen as selecting the pattern into which they will fit and joining the seams that hold them, and relationship is viewed as imbuing the aesthetic whole of the finished quilt with a symbolic meaning. (p. 268)

In summary, the portraitist captures the beauty, richness, and complexity of the actor's experiences, acknowledges the social and cultural context that impact those experiences, and intentionally employs a variety of aesthetically enriching elements to allow the reader to connect and understand the portrait through the artist's lens. The reader continues to construct and reinterpret the portrait as they engage with the composition (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann-Davis, 1997).

As I employed portraiture to compose my participants' narratives, I hope to expand and enrich the current scholarship that examines African American women superintendents and their lived experiences. I hope this study provides ways to rethink educational leadership and inspire African American women and other women and persons of color who aspire to the superintendency.

Setting

My research study examines three African American women superintendents leading public school systems in the Southeast region of the United States. The Southeast region was selected for accessibility, and the larger population would aid in maintaining anonymity. The participants led in three public school settings that vary based on their district size, student demographics, geographic location, and community resources.

Each of the superintendents participated in two virtual Zoom interviews scheduled for 60 minutes each. Participants, to accommodate their busy and unpredictable schedules, determined when interviews were scheduled and selected meeting times outside of their normal office hours. The superintendents chose to conduct the virtual interviews in various locations, including their work office and home, and one superintendent participated in an interview while she was

traveling in her vehicle. I intentionally provided many options for the superintendents to ensure they were in a space where they felt comfortable and safe to share their stories.

Population/Sample

According to Mertens (2009), sampling strategies are selected based on the purpose of the research and the researcher's access to the population. Sampling strategies include probability-based, purposeful, or convenient. Some strategies, such as random sampling, are conducive to quantitative studies, while others are characteristic of qualitative studies. Other considerations before sampling are dimensions of diversity, power, and potential accommodations.

The population identified for the research study were public school superintendents in the Southeast region of the United States, and the unit of analysis was African American women superintendents. To understand the lived experiences of my participants, I used criterion-based and convenient sampling. Both are purposeful sampling typically used for smaller-scale qualitative studies (Mertens, 2009; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). In the first stage, I used a criterion-based strategy. The participants met the criteria in four categories: race (African American), gender (female), role (superintendent), and setting (public school unit). I selected three superintendents for this study and gained detailed data from each participant. I selected only three participants for this study using in-depth interviews to ensure a manageable sample size.

First, I identified potential Black female superintendents in Southeast region of the United States. I began by exploring the state department websites to look for a listing of superintendents and then followed with searching to determine if each state had a superintendent's association. I reviewed superintendent association websites to access information about those states' current superintendents. Some databases had photos paired with

the superintendent's names, making it easier to identify potential participants. In some cases, I reviewed the district websites to determine if the superintendent met the criteria for my study. I also asked each of the superintendents in the study to describe their identity to confirm that they met the criteria for the study. To organize the information, I created a table with a list of potential participants; however, this list was not inclusive to all Black women superintendents in the American Southeast. In gathering contact information, I found that some superintendents had general email addresses shared with other members of their organization. Therefore, I took a step further to access the direct email to the superintendent based on the email format found on their district website. This additional step helped me to send my research information directly to these executive leaders and to maintain confidentiality throughout the research study.

In the next stage of the process, I employed a convenience sampling strategy. Convenience sampling generates a research sample population based on candidates' interest in and availability for participating. Convenience sampling is appropriate due to the limited number of participants (Mertens, 2009) and was necessary for participants with demanding schedules.

Mertens (2009) suggests selecting a method for recruiting participants based on access and context. I began with a selection of superintendents that I anticipated would be interested in the study. I also designed the study with the intent to diversify my participants. To start, I invited three superintendents to participate in the study and contacted each of them through email. The first email included a brief introduction and the purpose of the research study. I also communicated the significance of the study, the benefits of the candidate's participation, and an opportunity to schedule a one-on-one visit to learn more about the research study. In the initial email, I included a survey link, Doodle Poll, to easily schedule a pre-interview meeting with those leaders who volunteered for the study. I provided a variety of meeting options within this

scheduling tool to accommodate the superintendent's schedule. Once the superintendent completed the survey, I followed up with a second email to welcome the superintendents to the study. I confirmed the meeting details, and included the Zoom link for the pre-interview. I also invited the superintendents to contact me if they had questions before our pre-interview or if they needed to reschedule our meeting.

I conducted a virtual introductory meeting to get to know the participants, share my passion for the research, communicate the purpose of the study, and answer any additional questions. I also communicated to each participant that I wanted to provide a small gift to thank them for their time. This recruitment strategy communicates to the participants that I value their time and appreciate their willingness to participate in the study.

During the convenience sampling phase, I followed up with an additional email if the superintendent did not respond. Eventually, I extended an invitation to another potential participant from my list. I did not have any superintendents decline participation. There were several who did not respond and one who initially expressed interest but eventually did not respond to subsequent emails. I invited a total of seven superintendents before I secured the three participants in this study.

Data Collection Methods

My research study used data collection tools to complement the methodology, portraiture. I used a semi-structured interview protocol to collect data for this study. In-depth interviews are best suited for this research because they allow the researcher to listen to and for a story that will capture the participants' lived experiences. Interviews allow the researcher to gain detailed information about each participant's perceptions, knowledge, and experiences. The data collected in this study contributed to the depth of the portraits.

Interviews

The study's interview process is described in four phases: pre-interview, tentative, immersion, and emergence (Mertens, 2009). The pre-interview phase is the virtual introductory meeting with each superintendent. During this meeting, I verbally provided details about the research through an informed written consent outlining the participant's rights. I emphasized my commitment to confidentiality and protecting participants' rights as defined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Trust, honesty, and transparency are imperative when creating a space for participants to be vulnerable and reflective (Mertens, 2009; Patton, 2015). In the tentative phase, Mertens (2009) recommends that the researcher use non-verbal and verbal skills to convey interest in the participant's story and be comfortable with natural pauses and silence in the conversations. During the immersion phase, the participant is allowed to use their communication style to convey their message. As the researcher is listening, they must be prepared to respond to emotional responses. Finally, the emergence phase brings closure to the interview, always leaving the participant in control.

Before the first meeting, I developed a profile of each superintendent based on the participant's biography, district website, news releases, and other relevant information that I gathered. This information helped me to develop conversation starters, and establish a rapport with each superintendent. In my experience with building relationships, connections are powerful. To create a comfortable and safe space for each superintendent, I shared about myself as a Black woman, educator, and researcher. I expressed my passion to research Black women, specifically Black women superintendents.

In this study, after completing my preliminary research activities including an introductory meeting and information gathering, I conducted two, 60-minute semi-structured interviews with each participant. The broad and open-ended interview questions prompted the participants to convey their stories in an authentic and meaningful way. Semi-structured interviews are conversational, and the phrasing of the questions should encourage positive interactions between the researcher and the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I posed questions intentionally to promote the level of transparency, freedom, and flexibility that is inherent to natural, authentic conversations. When conducting the interview, I had a printed copy of the interview questions accessible. As I engaged in conversation with the participants, I made notes of specific words and phrases that resonated with me. These short-hand notes helped me to pose follow-up questions in real time or to prepare for the subsequent interview.

I used Zoom, an online video conferencing tool, to record the video and audio during the virtual interviews. Before recording, I reminded the participants that the interview would be recorded. The Zoom features provided access to record and transcribe the conversation; however, I also uploaded the Zoom audio into an external transcription tool, Trint. Trint converted the audio into a relatively accurate transcription of the interview. I assessed the accuracy of the transcription by simultaneously reading the generated transcription and listening to the original audio. This process helped to create an accurate transcription of the interviews and to review the data multiple times before formally transitioning into the analysis phase. Once completed, I followed the same process for one final review.

Data Analysis

A researcher may employ myriad approaches when describing, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data. Often, the term data analysis encompasses description, analysis, and

interpretation; however, Wolcott (1994) distinguishes between these three stages of qualitative inquiry. The description provides the reader with a vivid account of what is being observed. The analysis seeks to identify the relationships among what is observed, and interpretation brings meaning to what has been observed. Qualitative inquiry is unique because the researcher may seamlessly transition from one stage to another depending on the study (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann-Davis, 1997; Wolcott, 1994).

In this section, I describe my plan to manage, analyze, and interpret the data. As previously stated, interviews are the primary method used to collect data from three African American women public school superintendents. Using the core tenets of portraiture, I describe the systematic structures and procedures that I used to organize and make meaning of the data.

Managing Data

I organized the data into Box, a secure cloud storage unit to retain and access the information collected and to maintain confidentiality. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), it is essential for researchers to create a management system where the data is accessible and enables efficient and effective analysis. I created digital folders within Box and labeled each one as Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3. I have a second document in a locked filing box that identifies the participants' names with their corresponding numbers. This two-way system enhances privacy and security because the pseudonyms and participant names do not appear on the same document. The two documents are also secured in two different locations and outside of the cloud-based management system. In each participant's digital file, I stored a copy of the original video and audio recordings of each interview, transcriptions, and the reflective journal. I labeled the recordings with the participant's number and interview (i.e., P1.1). The organization of the data was consistently maintained by labeling the files and making the data accessible to

the researcher. I also utilized member checking to allow my participants to review the transcription for accuracy and to provide feedback for clarity.

Analysis and Interpretation

In my study, I employed a systematic approach to identify patterns and emerging themes. Wolcott (1994) explains, “Analysis addresses the identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them—in short, how things work” (p. 12). As I sought to create portraits of three African American women superintendents, I approached my data collection with an interpretive stance. My research design, using portraiture, was flexible, allowing me to transition from data collection, analysis, and interpretation while being receptive to new information that describes each participant’s lived experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

I identified relevant themes from the current literature review, also called theory-generated codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), and merged those with principles from Intersectionality and Black Feminist Theory to design a framework that I used throughout all phases of the research. This analytic framework provided a focus during the research and clarity to my understanding of the participant’s voices. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) suggests that portraitists use an intellectual framework and guiding questions to search for emergent themes. “The framework is usually the result of a review of relevant literature, prior experience in similar settings, and a general knowledge of the field of inquiry” (p. 185). She encourages portraitists to begin with a framework and believes that doing so does not restrict the researcher’s ability to discover other themes. However, other scholars believe prefigured codes limit the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I consciously sought alternative perspectives and voices to illuminate their stories.

Based on the current literature, I determined six prefigured categories: leadership style, vision/mission, systems of support, Intersectionality/Black Feminist Thought, factors contributing to success, and challenges. I designed my interview questions to align with these areas. I began by immersing myself in the data by listening to the audio and reading the transcriptions simultaneously. I read the transcriptions multiple times in their entirety. The purpose of the first two reads was to familiarize myself with the information. During the third review of data, I wrote reflective notes in the margins to capture my thoughts, impressions, and questions. I also highlight specific quotes that resonated with me and quotes that captured the essence of their stories. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) identify these reflections as an “Impressionistic Record” (p. 188), while other scholars identify these writings as memos (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The reflections and review of data challenged me to identify new information and patterns. In the fourth and subsequent reviews of data, I labeled the data with various codes. Engaging in multiple reviews of the data, seeking patterns, and filtering information into categories will allow me to chunk the data into manageable pieces of information. Marshall and Rossman (2011) identify this process as data reduction. Data reduction occurs before you can begin interpretation with each phase of analysis.

The following represents the five modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) suggest that each portrait should employ to construct emerging themes.

1. Listen to repetitive refrains,
2. Listen to metaphors, poetic and symbolic expressions,
3. List for themes expressed through rituals,

4. Triangulate data from a variety of sources, and
5. Reveal themes that are alike and different among the actors

In my study, I used four of the five modes that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis identified for data analysis and interpretation. I excluded triangulation because I only conducted interviews with the participants.

Throughout this iterative process, my analysis transitioned from codes to themes. I utilized strategies suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), such as adding details to the codes, highlighting relevant quotes and why the quotes are essential, designing visuals to represent relationships between codes, and drafting summaries that capture salient points. After I generated a list of all of the codes, I then grouped similar codes together and identified a broader theme that represented each group of codes. Each theme had a designated color, and I highlighted the codes based on its assigned theme. Throughout the process of coding and the construction of emergent themes, interpretation began to occur. During this phase of the study, I connected the pieces of the puzzle to illuminate a story that captures the participant's lived experiences. These strategies helped me to make meaning of the data and portray the context and essence of the three African American women superintendents.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential to qualitative inquiry, and ethical considerations are considered throughout my research. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that researchers must identify ethical issues before conducting a study, during the initial phase of the study, throughout the data collection and analysis phase, and when reporting and publishing the study. I established trustworthiness through relationships, communication and transparency, reciprocity, and participant anonymity in this study.

In portraiture, trustworthiness emerges through relationship building. As a portraitist, relationship building is an ongoing process that lies at the core of the research methodology. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) describe the relationship-building process as such: “It is [a] complex, subtle, dynamic process of navigating the boundaries between self and other, distance and intimacy, acceptance and skepticism, receptivity and challenge, silence and talking” (p. 158). As described in previous sections, I built relationships by researching my participants before the first meeting and used the pre-interview meeting to connect with them. The face-to-face interaction allowed us to observe each other’s linguistic patterns, expressions, and mannerisms. I expressed my authentic desire, investment, and passion for elevating the voices of African American women. My position as an African American woman in leadership also helped me build trustworthiness and enhance the relationship.

Ongoing dialogue helps to achieve trustworthiness because there is value in the voice of the researcher and participant (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997). Ongoing communication and transparency were paramount in my research study. I communicated the purpose of the study both verbally and in written form. At the beginning of each session, I stated the purpose of the study and allowed space to clarify any information and ask questions. In alignment with features of portraiture, the participants and I negotiated the terms of the study, discussed the interdependent nature of our relationship as it related to the study, and set boundaries with time. I cultivated trustworthiness and minimized ethical issues through the transparency of data. Participants had access to the data, and I utilized member checking to allow my participants to review the transcription for accuracy and provide feedback.

Participants’ anonymity and confidentiality were also essential aspects of building trust, demonstrating respect, and avoiding ethical issues. Because of the small number of African

American women superintendents, I used pseudonyms to represent each superintendent and the public school units they served. I selected my participants from a large geographic area (Southeastern United States) in order to ensure anonymity. I changed the names of people and places to maintain the confidentiality of all participants. I did not explicitly share any information that was identifiable. I honored a request of one superintendent who shared one of her experiences but asked that it not be revealed in the research. I maintained confidentiality and kept the participant's anonymity at the forefront of this study.

Limitations

The study used a small sample size and did not represent all Black women superintendents. My participants led in districts in the Southeastern United States; therefore, their geographic location was a contextual factor that influenced their experiences. Although the findings highlighted commonalities among these three women and other African American women, their stories were unique. Scholars and practitioners should not use this study to make generalizations about all African American women superintendents.

Summary

In Chapter III, I provided an outline of my research design, including details about the setting, population and sample, data collection methods, and data analysis and interpretation. I utilized portraiture to understand and reflect on the lived experiences of three African American women superintendents, Cinnamon Taylor, Olivia Robinson, and Carrie Broome.

CHAPTER IV: PORTRAIT OF DR. CINNAMON TAYLOR

Dr. Cinnamon Taylor is a well-known superintendent respected by her colleagues and peers. She has been the superintendent of Waterford for 6 years, but her influence extends beyond her district. Her distinguished leadership is recognized statewide, and it has paved the way for others, specifically Black women superintendents.

My first meeting with Cinnamon was through Zoom, but I had seen her in other educational spaces. She made an impression on me because she was always confident and sophisticated. When we officially connected on Zoom, I sensed excitement about our time together. It was an honor to be in her presence because, in my eyes, Dr. Taylor exemplified greatness. In our first virtual interview, Dr. Taylor was driving, and she turned her camera off to avoid technical issues. However, for the second virtual interview, Dr. Taylor was at home. She wore a casual blue, collared polo shirt with her organization's logo printed on the left pocket. Cinnamon wore a pair of glasses that caught my attention. The glasses had dark frames and a light-colored trim around the edges. The frames had a sharp, pointed, cat-like shape and were perfectly positioned on her face. She wore a pair of dangly earrings that gently moved as she talked. Cinnamon was relaxed and down-to-earth, yet professional. When I posed questions, she was matter-of-fact as she talked about her experiences and infused her sense of humor. I began the interview by asking her to tell her story. She recalled events throughout her life that have influenced who she is, what she believes, and how she chooses to lead.

From Childhood to College

Cinnamon was originally born in North Madison, located in the western part of the state. After a divorce, Cinnamon's mother moved her and her two older siblings from a relatively small, less progressive town to what was considered, "the big city." Cinnamon expressed how

her mother's decision to make a major transition impacted her. "I think that probably shaped just my belief system around women and leaders and women's abilities to be able to do the hard things that we just often didn't see women doing in that arena."

Cinnamon's mother was a school educator. She talked about her upbringing and her family's core values and expectations. She modeled herself after those who came before her. She stated:

And so education and family and working hard were just things that you did ... it was never a question in my house, would you go to college? It was which one would you go to? And it's not that all of her siblings went to college, but all of her siblings are successful and, you know, attribute their success to hard work and kind of sticking to it. And that those are just the things that we did. Those are the things that we believed in. I don't think anybody ever sat me down and said, now you got, you're going to work hard, right? It was just you seeing what others did and you modeling yourself after them. Rather, it was my mom or one of my aunts or my uncles, just knowing this is what you do to be successful. It felt like it wasn't a burden, but it felt like an expectation of our community and of our family, and kind of our ancestors that you do the hard things because being successful taking care of your family matters.

Cinnamon began high school at Duncan High School. It was a beautiful new school located in the western part of her school district. Cinnamon talked about one teacher who was influential at Duncan High School. She had a Chemistry teacher that she described as "a really cool science teacher" who connected her with several programs in the medical field. She wanted to be a medical doctor and was excited that she was selected to participate in those opportunities at Duncan.

During her study at Duncan, one of her high school friends introduced her to Central Lake College, an all-girls private school. Although they had a traditional high school track like Duncan, Central Lake College would give her an opportunity to complete high school and her freshman year of college altogether. Central Lake was similar to our current early college model. This model was appealing to her, so Cinnamon investigated and learned more about the school. Both she and her mom were interested, but the costs were too expensive, considering her mom was a single parent and her siblings were preparing for college. Being adventurous and a person who doesn't take no for an answer, she took the necessary steps to make it happen.

And so I remember getting out of school. I remember calling [Central Lake] College talking to the folks on the phone. Now, remember, I was in the 11th grade, and so I probably was 15 or 16 years old. I talked to them on the phone. I made an appointment. I made the appointment in late afternoon so that I could go to my school during the day, get off my school bus, go home, change clothes, get on city transportation, catch the bus to [Central Lake], and make the appointment. So I think my appointment was like maybe 4:00 or something like that. I got off my school bus probably; back in the day, we went early and got out early. So it may have been like 2:30, got home, changed my clothes, and changed my clothes was ... dressing the part, right? These were rich white kids, and I was going to make sure that I knew the president or whoever I was going to be talking to was going to be probably a rich white guy, right? And so you look the part, and my typical high school clothes were not what you wear to an interview. They were [Central Lake] College. So I got off the bus, made the interview, had to cross the street on Peachtree, had to cross the street, went up to this beautiful, ornate building, went into the back, went up the stairs. I can still see it now.

I asked Cinnamon about knowing how to “dress the part.” Her phrase intrigued me because it reminded me of how some students do not have the experience to know the unspoken rules that are needed to adapt to society’s norms, “dressing the part.” Cinnamon explained that she learned she had to “look like a business lady” from having older siblings who participated in activities such as scouts or debutante balls. Although her mother approved of her attire, Cinnamon knew what was acceptable in other settings.

Cinnamon arrived at the interview dressed like a business lady. She wore a dress blouse and pants with a pair of dress flats. Her outfit was accompanied with a purse, and she carried a large envelope with the paperwork she needed to bring with her. Cinnamon was a little nervous but prepared and not afraid of doing something that she had never done. When she first arrived at the interview, it was clear that they were surprised by the look on their faces. They were surprised that she was African American and that she was alone. Her mom was not present because she was a teacher; however, Cinnamon knew she had to “do what she had to do” because it was her dream to attend Central Lake. When she talked to the college’s president, she discussed why she wanted to attend Central Lake and her goal to be a medical doctor. She expressed, “Central Lake would give me a lift up, and I would have access to additional classes than the traditional high school.” She was not well-versed with microaggressions at the time, but during the interview, they asked about financial aid assistance. She told them, “That would be a great idea” knowing that this was a concern for her family. The process of applying and interviewing at Central Lake College was a new experience, but it was necessary to achieve her dream.

I left there that day, and I had never done anything like that. So it wasn’t like I was a part of Jack and Jill or any organizations like that. I’d never done anything like that, but I

wasn't afraid. I didn't see the people who were sitting in front of me as more than I was. I saw them as they have—they have the keys to something that I want, and my job and responsibility is to go in there and to show them that I deserve it. And I was a kid, but I wasn't afraid. I don't know why I wasn't afraid. I should have been. I think coming in, I was a little nervous, but I wasn't afraid, and I was not going to be intimidated.

While at Central Lake, Cinnamon was one of two Black students in her graduating class. The other African American student was a female, but they did not have all their classes together. Cinnamon distinctly remembered sympathizing with her situation.

Her father had remarried and married a white woman. And they had children together. And so she would pretend to be biracial, which she wasn't. And so I always felt sorry for her ... they sent you to this basically all-white school. And so she and I, wouldn't say we were friends, we were friendly, but she always felt like she was, she couldn't be her authentic self.

Cinnamon shared with me that one of her pet peeves is inauthenticity; however, she empathized with her peer being in a difficult situation.

Cinnamon was essentially the “only one” at Central Lake, yet she was never intimidated by being in spaces where she may be the only person of color. I remember being the only Black student in my high school advanced classes, but the idea of being the only one never kept me from going after what I wanted. Similarly, Cinnamon's upbringing and belief systems helped her to believe that she was capable of fulfilling her dreams even if the people around her did not look like her. Attending Central Lake was tough for Cinnamon because some of her professors were not in favor of having a Black girl in their classroom. She knew those adults were not always doing what was right. It was not egregious, but she knew the adults did not have her best

interest at heart. She went to school during a time when it was not popular to advocate for herself. No matter how she was treated, she did not complain or report this to the administration. She remained steadfast and focused on her work. Cinnamon recalls how one professor subtly excluded her.

When I sat in the class, whatever side of the classroom I sat on, the professor would talk to the other side of the class. So what did I do? I sat beside the student that I knew he really, really liked. So then he had no choice ... I would make sure that I engage with those students.

Instead of reporting this discriminatory behavior, Cinnamon's response made it difficult for the professor to exclude her. After all, she came to Central Lake for opportunities and refused to allow one professor to deny her access to a quality education.

Pathway to the Superintendency

Cinnamon's pathway to the superintendency may be considered nontraditional because she began her career in business and accounting. She attended several colleges and universities, both public and private institutions, in the state where she resides. Although education was not her first career, she remembered her mom as a teacher and was inspired by her work. "I saw my mom each day, an absolutely fabulous teacher. I saw her make magic happen, and I wanted to be able to do that with kids and with learning."

Cinnamon began as a high school teacher. She cherished her time in the classroom and loved being with students. When talking about her experience teaching, she stated, "And that probably is still my favorite job, is being a teacher because I absolutely love my kids." In talking with other administrators, I have heard them speak about how they had someone in their career

who led them to administration. Cinnamon was not any different. She mentioned her assistant principal as the person who planted those seeds and saw her potential in administration.

My assistant principal kept nagging at me to get my MSA, and I was like, No, that is not of interest to me ... He kept at me. You can impact kids. You can do this. He said we need people like you. And I'm thinking, he's just selling me a bill of goods.

Cinnamon was initially resistant, but she completed her Master's in School Administration and moved into the school leadership role. She served as an assistant principal and principal. Her school leadership experience was in two large school districts; she was grateful to have had the experience at elementary, middle, and high school. "I think it's just a great way to learn a little bit about all of it and understand some of the processes and what's needed at each level."

Next, Cinnamon transitioned into the Director of Curriculum position in Forton County Schools. Her experience in this new position was unique because she was serving in a district community different from where she served as a school leader. Forton's demography and economic profile were vastly different. Therefore, when Cinnamon assumed the director role, she had an eye-opening experience. She shared with me, "I came from [Stratford], came from [Batonville], I had not seen anything like that. It really gave me a different appreciation for students, needs, resources, finances, and how that makes a huge difference for kids."

The transition was a shocking experience because Stratford and Batonville were both large school districts. They were organizations with an abundance of resources that other school systems, specifically Forton, did not have.

Cinnamon "moved up the ladder" in educational leadership by serving as an assistant superintendent and interim superintendent. She expressed that she had a "wow moment" when

she served as the interim superintendent because of the differences between the two roles. Soon after, Cinnamon applied for the superintendency in Forton, but the school board selected another candidate.

At the time I couldn't see it and so I was hurt when I didn't get it. Not angry, but hurt shortly thereafter. You know, God will just give you what you're supposed to have and not. And, and I could see it now was like, thank you. That was not the superintendency for me even though I love the people in [Forton]. I felt like they always wanted to get better. I think they recognized they weren't where they wanted to be. And I think that's like the perfect setting for a leader, for folks to want to get better and know that we need to get better and that we believe that you and your team and your ideas and your vision can help us get better. So I felt like [Forton] was the perfect setting, just not for me. And it's okay and I'm happy for them. And I couldn't see it, but it was perfect.

Although the outcome was not favorable for her, Cinnamon demonstrated strength, and resiliency, and understood that every opportunity was not always a great opportunity for her. She was disappointed at the moment, but she believed that God had a bigger plan.

Cinnamon's career in Forton ended when her former superintendent asked her to move to Waterford County Schools. For the next 5 years, Cinnamon served as a director and an assistant superintendent in Waterford. She enjoyed both middle and senior-level management positions.

I was pretty jazz becoming a director and assistant superintendent. And I felt like in those roles, I was pretty safe. I was safe. I could support my leader without having to have my neck on the line. If that makes sense. I was in safe roles. I could support the superintendent. I could participate in the county commissioner presentation with the superintendent, but I didn't have to answer the hard questions, be in the hot seat, be on

the hook if something goes wrong. So it's a pretty, it's a pretty good position to be assistant superintendent or deputy superintendent because you don't ... answer to the superintendent. I don't have to answer to the board per se. Like I don't have to answer to the community. I do answer to parents when the superintendent has assigned me to take care of something, right? But it's not on, all the times like it is.

Cinnamon spoke about how she had not dreamed of being a superintendent. "My dream was ... do better, to make situations for students and communities better. I think that was more of the impact that I wanted to have rather than a particular title, if that makes sense?" When the superintendent vacancy was announced in Waterford, Cinnamon had no intentions of applying for the position. She shared with me,

My other superintendent was moving on to another, and what I was not going to do is, I was not going to apply for the position in Waterford. Why? I had experienced applying in [Forton]. Someone else is selected, and that superintendent kind of ... He didn't feel comfortable with me because he felt like I wanted his job. Now, sure, I wanted to be superintendent, but I wouldn't have not done my work and not supported him because that's just not like time again, my core beliefs. You do the right thing. But he didn't know me. And so I think he felt like she applied for the job, she didn't get it, she's going to be against me. Absolutely not. And I just didn't want to apply in [Waterford], possibly not get it, new superintendent comes in, and they feel like I'm against them or I'm going to undermine them, and I didn't want to go through that. That was not pleasant. And I, career-wise, I thought I had a beautiful career. I don't want to end my career on a sour note or feel like I had to leave the district that I've been in.

At that time, the Waterford Board of Education expressed their desire to have Cinnamon serve as the next superintendent. Although cautious, she moved forward because the board clearly stated they wanted her as the next superintendent. She had the board's support but was determined to bring her best to the interview. She explained that the interview process created a space to reintroduce herself and connect with the board members in a different way. After interviewing and presenting her 30-60-90 transition plan, the board members decided. With a majority vote, Dr. Cinnamon Taylor was announced as the next superintendent of Waterford County Schools.

The Superintendency

Context Matters

Dr. Cinnamon Taylor, the first African American woman superintendent in Waterford County Schools, was installed as Superintendent in July 2017. She experienced being “the only” or “the first” African American woman in many situations within and beyond the educational field. Most recently, she received a prestigious award in educational leadership. When she realized that she was the first Black women recipient, she responded,

I never was excited about being the first. I was excited to have an opportunity and a pathway to help others ... That's great if I'm the first one, but it ought not [to] be that way. 2022? In the field of education? As much as women have done, I'm the first Black female? Wow. Like that's an honor, but it also is a scary fact.

Although she expressed her gratitude, Dr. Taylor was disturbed that we are still celebrating “firsts” for African American women in education. It should be normal to see Black women leaders receive prestigious awards.

When I asked her why she decided to become a superintendent, Dr. Taylor admitted that she did not know if she ever dreamed of becoming a superintendent. Instead, she described her dream in this way. “I had the dream of doing the right things, making schools or school systems better than we found them, having parents and community and kids like experience and have opportunities.” In reflecting on her first and only superintendent position, she felt she was initially at an advantage. Dr. Taylor had developed collegial relationships and friendships when she served as Assistant Superintendent in Waterford. She also had a team of leaders who understood the rich culture and challenges of the community. Superintendent Taylor expressed that she had a fairly good team and credited the former superintendent for knowing how to build good teams.

Dr. Taylor was not a stranger to Waterford and had a wealth of knowledge about the community’s culture. Waterford County Schools, situated in a county of several small, rural communities, had an approximate total population of 50,000 people. More than half of the population identified as Black/African American, and approximately 22% lived below the poverty line. I asked Dr. Taylor to describe the culture of the community and speak about how her leadership has shaped the community. She defined poverty as it relates to education.

So poverty is more than just not having money. Poverty impacts decisions that you make. Poverty impacts not necessarily what you think about education, but it makes you have to make hard choices that may appear as though you don’t value it. And I don’t believe that’s true because you’re poor, because you’re poor, you don’t value it. I don’t think those two are the same. I know too many people who grew up poor who really overcame, and their parents were insistent that they be well educated. So I don’t believe those two belong together. But I do think sometimes, in poverty, you have to make hard decisions,

decisions that you typically wouldn't if you had some other options or you had more support.

Dr. Taylor described Waterford as rural and high poverty but immediately followed with an explanation of how high poverty can be misinterpreted. She dismantled any assumptions that others may have when they hear the word, high poverty.

Superintendent Taylor empathetically expressed that many people have experienced significant trauma, and when you look at ACES (adverse child effects) or the road map of need, Waterford scores high on all of the indicators that are most detrimental to a community. She also acknowledged that many do not have adequate resources; however, poverty does not capture the essence of the community. Superintendent Taylor stated, "What I find in [Waterford] is a resilient people." Despite the obstacles, [Waterford] finds a way to overcome them, just like the people of [Riverway]. Dr. Taylor spoke about Riverway, an African American community in Waterford County. This town was originally incorporated by Black people, and its citizens were insistent on preserving their tight-knit community.

And I think that's a part of the culture, is that digging deep and hard, even though you had hard knocks, continuing to push forward, even when you recognize things are stacked against you, you still keep pushing and being resilient. And I do think that's more important than the fact of what they don't have.

Superintendent Taylor spoke about Waterford with pride. She described the agriculture, the rich soil, and how she delights in the fresh produce. Dr. Taylor's nature was to see the greatness in others, and there was a spirit of positivity when she described the culture and context of the community she served. She focused on sharing positive attributes and defined others by their potential and not their problems.

Superintendent Taylor’s leadership positively impacted the community. In fact, her previous work as a principal in an affluent community helped her to set high expectations for everyone and support families in holding her schools accountable.

It’s helped me to create that culture of where I’m going to set high expectations for all of our students, for all of our staff ... all of our schools, and that there’s really no acceptable reason not to do that. And I think that if it’s good enough for my high-flying parents that we’re addressing, what then it should be good enough for, say, a child and a parent at [Riverway] Elementary School.

Leadership Style

When I asked Superintendent Taylor to describe herself as a superintendent, she responded, “Besides exhausted and tired?” The realness of her response made us both chuckle because we know that in leadership, it is normal to feel tired and exhausted. Her response also represented what I observed throughout our dialogue—authenticity. Superintendent Taylor’s motto was, “If it’s best for students, I’m with you. If it’s not what is best for students, I can’t do it.”

Superintendent Taylor used various iterations of the phrase, “If it’s best for students, I’m in.” This refrain permeated throughout our dialogue, especially when she described her leadership. The repetition of this phrase expressed her passion for students, staff, and the community. Students were always kept at the forefront of her leadership and at the center of every decision. Superintendent Taylor cultivated a culture of family and community that are both rooted in love and doing what is best for kids. She told her staff that she loved them. Although Superintendent Taylor never explicitly connected love with her spirituality, listening to her describe the ways that she defined love felt spiritual.

As I always say and I mean it, like I say to my staff, I love you, and I mean it. Do I know each individual person as well as the next? No, but I, what I do, what I love is, I love the human in you. I love that you have this. You are part of educating students in our community, and you're sticking it out, and you want to be here ... So if I love you, I expect you to love them [students]. Right? And it's not like a burden. It's an honor. Like, I expect you to treat them with love and kindness.

Love is a simple word, yet it is complex because love manifests itself in various ways. For Superintendent Taylor, her love for people was natural and grounded in care, honesty, and transparency. The first adjective that she chose to describe herself is open. "I feel like folks can come and talk to me about anything. They can email me and chat with me about anything." Superintendent Taylor explained that honesty is critical in loving others. She stated, "Telling people the truth is loving them." As a teacher, her principal did not take this approach, so she was not willing to tell untruths because it does not serve others well. Furthermore, Superintendent Taylor was upfront about her inability to keep up with the truth or untruth. "So what you see from me is what you get. I don't have a hidden agenda."

Superintendent Taylor viewed her staff as family. Love and family go hand-in-hand. In a family, everyone is cared for, valued, and respected. She modeled the concept of family in her everyday actions, and she believes that they are all part of a team working together. When something must be done, titles are irrelevant. The work simply must be done.

There are times where I'm setting up for a meeting, I'm getting the food, I'm prepping, and people come up, look like, why are you doing that? Plus, it needs to be done. Right? I'm not too good for anything like that. We need to clean up ... I don't call someone to do it. I get the stuff and I dust the table ... we're a family. That's what we do.

Superintendent Taylor's love for her staff represented her investment in people. When talking about her staff, she believed in their ability to do great things. She saw the best in others and communicated that everyone was skilled. She believed it was her responsibility to help others discover their greatness. However, love was not the absence of expectations and accountability. Superintendent Taylor provided tough love when needed and engaged in crucial conversations. She set an expectation that employees do what is right and they do what is best for students. She did not have favorites, but if she had to identify favorites, it would be those who are focused on doing what is best for kids. For those who are not doing what is best for kids, Superintendent Taylor unapologetically engaged in difficult but necessary conversations.

Let's talk about it. Like, let's talk about why. Not throw you out, but let's talk about why not? Now, if we can't get to a space where you see that your responsibility is to do these things, then this might not be the right, best fit for you ... and we don't have time for you to, you know, as an adult, you know, it's going to take you 4 or 5 years before you decide you're going to care about, love kids. That's too much time. Too many kids have come through your classroom for that.

Superintendent Taylor communicated that adult issues would not interfere with educating their young people. She believed it was her responsibility to step in, hold others accountable, and to eliminate any harm to children.

Dr. Taylor described herself as ambidextrous because she constantly juggled both the present and the future. My experience as a principal was similar and I nod in agreement as she explained this concept. Metaphorically, Dr. Taylor's left hand manages day-to-day activities and daily operations of the school system. She knew what was happening in maintenance, transportation, and child nutrition. However, her right hand was planned for the future, found

opportunities for innovation, and made strategic moves to help propel Waterford to the next level. She led with this question, “What are the things we’re going to do that are going to help our kids make it not just to the next level, but help them to be successful?” Leadership requires both the left and right hands working together equally and sometimes simultaneously.

Dr. Taylor firmly believed that superintendents must have the skill set to navigate the political landscape. She described politics as omnipresent, and Superintendent Taylor provided a glimpse of the everyday political work:

The political piece is all the time. And you just have to you have to be aware of what’s going on, having your ear to the ground in the community; if that’s not your forte, having someone or people who will share back with you, keep you knowledgeable about what’s going on, whether it’s really good stuff or really bad stuff, how people are feeling, if someone’s upset about something or something is bothering them, being able to know what the topic is, be able to quickly research what our policy says, being able to get to principal or teacher and try to dissect what’s going on before it becomes a bigger issue. Sometimes, it’s going to be a bigger issue anyway, and there’s just nothing you can do except for be prepared about what the situation is and be able to speak to it.

In her description of the political work, I listened for specific competencies that a superintendent may need to be successful. Communication, responsiveness, and environmental awareness were a few competencies that emerged in her description.

Superintendent Taylor spoke about recent hot topics in education, such as critical race theory and LGBTQ:

So we know CRT is hot and heavy, and people are talking about that and really don’t know what they’re talking about, but they think they do. LGBTQ that comes up and it

comes up in different ways. So it might come up. A student is saying they want to use a different bathroom. They want to go by different pronouns. Now, how do you unpack that? And you have to be careful. There are, you know, sometimes where you just, you know, you're exhausted, you're tired. You have a lot going on. There, it seems as though other things are more important. And what I say is be careful, because really what seems small can blow up really quickly. And so you have to be careful not to minimize any issue that might come up, that might be on somebody's radar because what seems maybe [small] to me is like a deal-breaker for somebody else. And so you really want to be careful and just think through things. I always say less is more. You do not always have to give A to Z how you feel about something. Sometimes step back, listen, process what's going on, or talk to colleagues.

Superintendent Taylor utilized a variety of stakeholders (i.e., district leaders, board chair, trusted community members) to keep a pulse on the district and to unpack complex issues. Her thought partners engaged in “real talk” and brought clarity to complex issues.

Sometimes it's refreshing because you can beat yourself up because you're thinking, this problem, you know, gosh, how did I let it get to this point? And then you realize you didn't. It's been that way for 30 years. Sometimes people don't want to tell you that because they want ... They want you to think it's a new problem, and they want you to fix it right [away]. And why didn't you know? And why didn't you fix it? Then why are we in this? And then you find out that was, you know, that was going on when your mama was in school ... Sometimes you just don't know. And you need to have that historical perspective if you were not there, if that's not where you grew up and kind of your community that you know about. So those things are not really things that you learn

in school. Those are things that I think as I went through each role I picked up along the way.

Race, Gender, and Social Justice

Dr. Taylor's platform included providing greater access and opportunities to students. Issues of equality, equity, and social justice emerged as she recalled stories throughout her life. In the context of race, Dr. Taylor talked about her experience applying for jobs as a young adult. She has had many experiences where she talked to an employer on the phone to prepare for an interview, and when she arrived, they were shocked that she was Black. Dr. Taylor explained that most employers assumed she was a white woman based on her resume. Their assumptions about her last name and the list of private and public institutions led them to believe she was White. She stated, "I've gone to an interview, and the person has said they were foolish enough to say, we didn't know you were Black, because they see [Central Lake] for high school and college." Cinnamon shared another example when she was in graduate school. She went in for an interview, and they told her, "The owner of the company did not think you were Black, and I'm pretty sure they don't really interview Black people." Dr. Taylor also mentioned a time when she was discriminated against based on race. "I had a time where I started a job, and then when I got there, they realized that I was Black ... it was orientation day, and they were like, all of a sudden, there wasn't a job."

I asked Superintendent Taylor what social justice means to her and how it informs her leadership. She explained that social justice is not something that is added to your leadership, but it is essential to who you are as a human. Dr. Taylor had a colleague who told her she was comfortable with having race conversations, but Dr. Taylor had a different perspective on race conversations. She described her reaction to the colleague's statement,

And I thought you haven't talked to the right person because it's supposed to be difficult and it's uncomfortable. Right. If I'm having to, you know, whether you're white or whatever race, and we're having a conversation about race in this country. It's uncomfortable, right? Because we know the history. And I'm not saying you're not brave enough to do it, but if you're not having a conversation with someone who's challenging you or they're probably not being honest. And so for me, the social justice piece, I think it has to be baked into everything we do ... It is—it is hard, and it is heavy, and it is all the time and every day. But I think some of the pieces around social justice and equity are simple things that we can do, giving children options, providing them with some different opportunities that they may not have had not had had a chance to experience. I think those things are important. I think selecting courses and listening to what they need and what they want to do, but also not pigeonholing girls and boys. I don't think it's just race. I also think it's gender. We often kind of leave that out where it is just race. And I think it's not just that. I think there are a lot of times where we shortchange girls, or we shortchange boys, or we say, this is kind of what you should be doing if you're a girl. Well, this is what you should be doing if you're a boy.

As a superintendent, Dr. Taylor advocated for children and worked to achieve educational equity. Her advocacy for children began long before the superintendency. During her first year of teaching, her niece explored college options and considered attending a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). The school counselor convinced her niece that a HBCU was an undesirable institution and beneath institutions like UNC-Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University. Dr. Taylor was a new teacher, but she addressed the issue with the school counselor because this experience was harmful to her niece. Throughout her educational journey,

Dr. Taylor continued to advocate for students and bring attention to issues through asking critical questions.

I think there's so many places where we can step in and we can help lead in these ways, and we can just ask a question. Sometimes it's just asking the question. Asking the right question can make people think. It doesn't mean that I'm putting you on the spot or saying you're wrong, but it's okay for me to ask you this question ... sometimes just asking the question gets people's attention. It's not an indictment. I'm just asking you a question, and I just want you to think about it. And it takes a lot of courage. I will tell you, it takes a lot of courage.

According to Dr. Taylor, social justice leadership and student advocacy were often questioned. Dr. Taylor had teachers who questioned her and others when they advocated for children who have been historically marginalized or students who are unable to use their voice and speak for themselves. "Others will get upset," she stated. "Other teachers will say oh, I know you are looking out for your boy." For her, it felt like negative peer pressure. Dr. Taylor believed it takes courage and a willingness to advocate for others. She used her equity lens to identify ways schools negatively impacted students and ensured that the students had equal opportunities.

I do think it takes a bit of courage. If you don't have enough courage and kind of wherewithal of who you are and whose you are, I think it's easy to—to not do it, to just kind of step back, let stuff [happen] at school. You see that this is not okay. You know, there are times where there's a rule or something that could be in a school, and it's negatively impacting a certain group of students. It could be girls. It could be black males. It could be white females, but if you don't, if you see it and you don't say anything, I'm not sure how you are okay with yourself when you're an adult, and you're,

you're there, and you're present ... We are all accountable and, and that's what I tell people.

She spoke about the phenomenal group of principals that she leads; however, she had to remind them of areas or groups of students who were overlooked. She led for social justice by asking the right questions at the right time and bringing attention to anything that did not serve students well.

As a woman of God, she believed that we are all accountable for how we show up. She referred to a bible scripture when talking about our ultimate accountability to God. "I might not know what you did and what you did, but we are all held accountable ... What [do] they say, what we do to the least of these ... I just don't want to have to answer those questions later to somebody else." There is a spiritual calling that fueled her desire to do the right thing for students and for people. "I don't want to be asked those questions. And I want to say ... I want my God to say, you did what was right for kids, and that matters to me." Her faith shaped her activism and social justice leadership.

Overcoming Challenges

During the interview, our conversations about social justice leadership and equity transitioned smoothly into speaking about potential challenges of leading as a Black female superintendent. The challenges she experienced were not unique to Waterford. Superintendent Taylor explained how her experiences differed from male and White leadership.

Dr. Taylor had the luxury of working closely with the former superintendent, who was a White male. She observed both positive and negative qualities about his leadership, but she shared, "If I were to behave as he did, I would not be in Waterford. I probably wouldn't have

lasted a year. The expectations and the patience for Black female superintendents were different from superintendents who are male or White. In addition, Dr. Taylor stated,

Many people, white and Black, do not particularly want to be supervised by a Black female. When we look at the data, when we look at the research, that's what the research says. Why I think that would be is individual. I don't know that everybody has the same rationale for the reason, but I think that that, you know, research shows black female superintendents generally stay in their position 24 to 36 months.

Dr. Taylor recalled two conversations with other African American women superintendent colleagues. She stated,

I know why things happened, but it wouldn't have happened the way had they not been a Black female. If they had been a black male, it wouldn't have happened that way. They probably would have lasted longer. I think people just have basically less patience for black female leadership, and I could go into more depth there, but I think that that's the crux of it.

Superintendent Taylor struggled with how this situation happens for Black females. A Black women's skillset was not the problem and she does not think they are "so mean and ill-equipped" that they cannot do the job. Dr. Taylor stated that it is political. She witnessed how the use of one wrong or inappropriate comment can lead quickly to dismissal.

... it's just a chipping away that happens and it happens quickly. And I've seen it sometimes as people I know personally and sometimes it's not, but it moves quickly. It doesn't take months. And if you look at the data, it's often not a buyout, it's often a goodbye. And you might get a fraction of what your male counterpart would get.

I prompted Dr. Taylor to speak about any challenges and experiences of microaggressions in the workplace. She responded, “It’s nearly impossible as a Black female to not experience ... it is nearly impossible not to experience the microaggressions.” Contrary to what others see, Dr. Taylor also experienced microaggressions from staff that she supervises. There were incidents that she recalled as situational. Superintendent Taylor observed that the microaggressions she experienced were “not necessarily responding as vigorously to something that might be going on under my leadership.” At times, she opted for someone else to present her idea and noticed the interest level or engagement from certain groups was different. Dr. Taylor stated,

What I want is ... I want for our kids to have opportunities. If those opportunities have to come wrapped in a White face, I don’t care. If it’s for our children, Black, White, Brown, if it helps them, I don’t care who needs to present certain things.

Dr. Taylor talked about the difficulty in recruiting White male candidates in her district. She had vacancies that had been great positions but the White male applicant pool was non-existent. This problem did not exist when Waterford was led by a White male superintendent. She doesn’t wonder why there are fewer White men applying for school and district positions in her district. She knows why. White men do not want a Black woman supervisor.

Dr. Taylor received questions about the number of Black women in her cabinet. She had three Black executives in the cabinet—the superintendent, Human Resource Director and Curriculum. Others would bring to her attention that she had three Black females in top positions and that it did not exist anywhere else in the country. She would respond, “Okay, is there a question?” She knew that the top three leadership positions in some districts are White and there are no questions asked. She related this situation to other real-world issues such as Black on

Black crime. She pointed out that no one refers to it as White on White crime because White is considered the norm. “White is considered what’s normal and we just don’t think about it. And when you do something different than that, then it’s a conversation.”

The challenges of a Black female superintendent were not isolated to race; there were challenges to being a female leader. Dr. Taylor spoke about how married women need a supportive spouse because sometimes it is difficult for men to understand the demands of their wife’s position. She needed to be in certain places and there were things that she could not miss. Superintendent Taylor explained the demand was part of her reality and urgent matters happened at unpredictable times.

I don’t have time to explain to my husband why I need to do X, Y, and Z. Sometimes something has happened, and I’ve got to be on the phone [whether] it’s, you know, Black Friday or we’re in the mall. I’ve got to get to a private space, and I may be on the phone for an hour. And I don’t have time to have a 20-minute conversation with you to explain to you why I’ve got to do this. I need you to let me do it. I don’t need the stress of you tapping your foot like what is taken ... I need you to support me. And when I come back to the table or come back to—to the store, I need you to be: “Is everything okay?” And I need you to be okay. If I want to share nothing or if I just want to unload. I just need you to be in that space because sometimes I don’t want to talk about it again like I do, you know, like, you know, kids being shot. This is bad. I don’t want to talk about it again. I just want to finish my retail therapy or my meal. And then maybe in a couple of days, I’ll talk about it, and maybe I never talk about it again because I just don’t want to live it again. I want to get through it and be done with it. And I think it takes a special spouse to be able to do that, and especially when it’s a male.

Dr. Taylor stated that for female superintendents, the demand of the job may have a negative effect on their relationships. Although the superintendency was not like a dissertation, the demand of both was extraordinary. One of her professors explained that many marriages get off track because the work require you to focus and shut other things out in your life. Although it was temporary, your spouse may have felt like they were shut out. Like the superintendency, the demand of the work could be detrimental to the marriage.

Dr. Taylor also described how females can contribute to the challenges of other women leaders. Other female superintendents shared with her that many times women do not want to contribute to another female's success. Generally speaking, women were content with serving males but when it comes to other females, it felt like a competition.

I can't tell you how many females in my district who have said or some iteration of this—that they could have been, and these are retirees, people who retired, who were in central office or who were principals. They could have been ... they could have been the superintendent. And I simply say that is wonderful. I don't know what else to say to you when you tell me that because maybe that is true. But even if it is, do you think that's appropriate? Like, what was your purpose for telling me that? That was to say, "Well, you think you're something, but I could have been superintendent, too."

This dialogue between Dr. Taylor and other female leaders represented the challenges of female leadership. Her experience described a spirit of competition, envy, and jealousy that can lead to females minimizing the efforts and success of other females. I have regularly talked about this issue with another Black female colleague. We discussed how difficult it is for some women to celebrate another woman's success, without interpreting the celebration as their own failure.

Communication and Supports

Superintendent Taylor talked about her experience dealing with inappropriate comments. She recognized that rude comments will occur, but there is strategy in how you approach it. “If you don’t have the political acumen to navigate a rude comment from someone, you’re not going to make it there.” She could respond with an inappropriate comment, but there was nothing to gain from doing so. She was not that kind of person and not going to invest time in foolery. Superintendent Taylor believed you have to be mature, remember who you are, and take the high road. The best response was to speak positivity such as, “That is wonderful. Now let me know when you want to take over for a day. I can use a break.” If there was anything that she wants to say that is unkind should be reserved for the family. We laughed together when she shared, “Thank God people cannot read your minds because we’d all be in trouble.”

Dr. Taylor pointed out that when people were “inappropriate in a different kind of way,” she addressed the issue with them. There will be a warning, but “You know how they say your bark is bigger than your bite ... I used to tell people when I was a principal, I don’t bark. So you know what that means.”

Superintendent Taylor exercised control and was careful not to speak loosely. She believed that you do not need to be unpleasant in order to communicate. This was a staple of her leadership.

There may be a lot of things people say about me. What they’re not going to tell you is that I was nasty or rude to them, that I was mean to them or mistreated them. Does it mean I’ll hold you accountable? Of course. Are [there] going to be some tough conversations? For sure. I can tell you the same thing in a pleasant, in a calm manner that I can if I’m yelling and acting crazy.

I asked Dr. Taylor about factors, despite the challenges, that have helped her to be successful in the role. She had a circle of people and organizations in her life that supported her. When she talked about district staff, she stated,

And if you don't have a circle who like taps you on your shoulder and say, you know, we have Teacher Appreciation Day, and sometimes it's not that you don't care, it's just your plate is so full, so many things, and you can't miss those things like you have to be. I mean, you have to have people like that. You have to have people who say, remember, you've got to go to Staple Elementary today to read, and I'm thinking, oh, gosh. And then you have this angel who says, and here's your book.

Dr. Taylor had support from other members of her district and school leaders that help her to be successful. She might be at a meeting off campus and there was an issue at one of the sites that requires communication to parents. She communicated what needs to happen but leaned on her public information officer (PIO) to draft a message and then send back for her and the principal to read. She had a support system in Waterford, like the PIO, who stepped in so that she did not have to be absent for another meeting. She acknowledged her cabinet and a core group of principals who had an innovative mindset. Their ideas supported the innovation in the school district.

They'll send me an email, they'll call me or they'll text me. And it's always something that is improving the school. I think they know that that excites me. And so as soon as they start describing, I'm like, this sounds wonderful. Please send me such and such, but move forward.

Dr. Taylor stated that superintendents need support from people who truly care about them. There were people who cared about the district, but it was important that you have a few core members of your team who are committed to the district and your wellness.

You have to have some folks in the roles who care not just about the school system and their work, but they also care about you and wanting to make sure you'll be okay. So having that combination of skill for them, compassion for the school system, but also a concern for the person who's the leader. That matters, too ... they're going to help me make sure that I'm okay and a person and that as a superintendent, that we're going to have success in our school system, and that—that's huge.

Dr. Taylor communicated that her connections to various organizations contributed to her success and supported her leadership. She served on the board of her state superintendent's association and gained a wealth of knowledge about the state department and other agencies. Her participation in this organization afforded her an opportunity to network with her superintendent colleagues and discuss relevant issues that impacted schools.

I have colleagues there. I can talk to them. I can reach out and say, I heard you're doing such and such program. Maybe I won't do the exact same program maybe. I'm going to tweak it, but I get to hear from that person. And so just that collegial dialogue is really important and having thought partners within, you know, other superintendents.

Superintendent Taylor identified other supports such as professional organizations with a vision aligned to her own. She spoke about an organization focused on innovative programs and practices that provided funding to her district and assisted with program design and implementation. She leveraged "purposeful partnerships" aligned to Waterford's strategic plan and established reciprocal relationships that were a win-win for everyone.

Under her leadership, Superintendent Taylor encouraged and provided staff professional development and many growth opportunities. She intentionally selected professional learning opportunities that benefited her and her school district. Dr. Taylor capitalized on the human capital and resources within and beyond Waterford County Schools.

Dr. Taylor spoke about the importance of having mentors and coaches. Her first year as a superintendent was tough. She described the experience as “unbearable” some days; however, the support of a mentor would have made the difference.

I think it’s important to have someone to coach you, to mentor you. I wish I had done that early on, my first probably year, year and a half. I didn’t have that, and there were some things that were really, really hard, and there were some days that were that were almost unbearable. And I think if I had someone who I knew that, you know, coaching me and saying, hey don’t, like this is what you need to do your first 30 days, your first 60 days, your first 90 days. Then I probably wouldn’t have had, I mean, it was just, it was hard because you don’t want to mess up. You want to get it right. And then it’s so much coming at you that it’s scary. And I just, yeah, I kind of suffered through that the first eighteen months. But at the time, I didn’t necessarily see it that way. And having someone who was coaching or mentoring me, they probably could have helped me just [she sighed] breathe.

Conclusion

I asked Superintendent Taylor to speak about why there are few African American women superintendent and she explains how others see Black women.

When most people think about leadership, most people—men and women—they think about men. That’s the default. I think most people, Black and white, when they think

about leadership, they think about whiteness. Right? Black women are neither. I think that there are times when Black women are portrayed negatively in social media in a number of arenas. We could, you know, we could turn on TV, and we could point them out.

She continued to explain why there were few Black female superintendents using a conversation she had with a White female colleague as an example. This person was fairly liberal and frequently interacted with Black male and female leaders. She wanted to ask Dr. Taylor a question but could not determine how to ask the question without fear of offending Superintendent Taylor. Dr. Taylor invited her colleague to ask her the question. She stated, “Just ask it. If you offend me, I’ll tell you, and I will assume that you didn’t mean to do that because you asked, right?” It turned out that her White female colleague was curious as to why Superintendent Taylor, a Black woman, did not get emotional and was easy to get along with and non-confrontational. Dr. Taylor concluded that this dialogue represented how others see us. Society holds negative, stereotypical images of Black women. She reflected on their interaction:

If that is your question to me. Then what would most boards [think]? They’re not going to ask that question. They’re just going to not select you because, when, you know, a Black female gets upset, what are they going to act like? How are they going to carry themselves?

This is an anecdotal example of how others see Black women. Dr. Taylor stated, “I think there’s quite a bit to overcome when people have already sometimes made up their mind who they think you are.”

In her final comments, she talked about who she is and life beyond the superintendency. Dr. Taylor stated,

I think for me, that foundation is when I get home, and I'm no longer the superintendent in Waterford, I'm still someone's mom, I'm still someone's wife, I'm still someone's sister. And those roles will continue to happen. This was work. And I love it. But that doesn't stay. I don't stay that person. Right. I get to do some other things ... I have another life that goes beyond the superintendency. And sometimes I think we can become our job or we can become our work in a negative way. And I never wanted to do that. I love the work, but the title is not me. That's not who I am.

Superintendent Taylor shows us that her Black Girl Magic is not defined by one identifiable trait, but her Black Girl Magic comes from her very existence. It is her spirit, energy, and her very presence that exudes excellence. Dr. Taylor's confidence to let her own light shine, humbleness to elevate the greatness in others, and her commitment to doing all things with love only captures a glimpse of Dr. Taylor's Black Girl Magic.

CHAPTER V: PORTRAIT OF DR. OLIVIA ROBINSON

Dr. Olivia Robinson is an African American female superintendent, a wife, and mother of two children. She stated that she is leading one of the best public school institutions in her state. Olivia is in her first superintendency and is relatively young both in age and experience. She has an extensive background in education and brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to Montane City Schools.

Before we met, I read Olivia's biography and Montane's strategic plan, which was developed under her leadership. I was excited to talk with her about her social justice agenda. Dr. Robinson wore a black, high-collar, printed shirt when we met. She sat in a high-back, pistachio-colored chair, and it appeared she was in her superintendent's office. Mounted on the wall behind her, I saw a black visual display with words written on it. Most of the words I could not decipher because the writing was faint. The display resembled a positive affirmation or compliment wall because I saw a few hearts next to the words. The few words I saw clearly read, "Dr. Robinson is the best!"

Olivia frequently talked with her hands, so I saw her freshly manicured nails. What I admired about her look was her hair. Historically, a Black woman's hair has been an expression of their identity and represents who they are. She had these breathtaking, golden brown twists that rested softly on the back of her shoulders. From my perspective, Dr. Robinson's choice of hairstyle made a powerful statement. Her hair normalized Black beauty in professional spaces and signifies how she leads as her authentic self. During our time together, she spoke with clarity, confidence, and urgency about her intentions as a superintendent. Dr. Robinson conveyed her passion and commitment to students as she proudly articulated her story.

Family and Childhood Experiences

Olivia was born and raised in Parcel County, one of the most affluent counties in the state. She lived with her mother and stepbrother until the age of seven. At that time, her stepbrother went to live with his father in another state. Olivia's dad was present in her life, but she lived mostly with her mother. Although she lived in a single parent home, she had the support of other family members. In fact, she lived with her paternal grandparents for extended periods of time while her mom was "trying to get herself together".

So, my dad's side of the family was really tight-knit family. On my mom's side of the family, a number of people are challenged with mental health issues and just all kinds of things that most Black families have to deal with. Right? So, I felt like I got a pretty good balance of like what the possibilities of life were, but also some of the deep challenges that Black families face.

Olivia mentioned family members who have influenced her life. She identified her mother and paternal grandparents as the most influential people, and she described their impact on her life.

I was very much influenced by my mom and her grit, she used to say, "been there, done that, got the t-shirt, and wore it out." She was very much the, suck it up, buttercup, type of mom. I've always just been inspired by her grit and, you know, kind of see it through type of approach to life. And my grandparents that I spoke of, they were just, if it were not for them, I wouldn't be in education today. If it were not for them, I wouldn't have been able to experience many of the things that I did experience.

I smiled after she shared the “been there, done that” saying that her mom would usually quote. I am familiar with this saying because I have a mentor who would say this, but the twist at the end, “got the t-shirt and wore it out,” made me laugh.

In school, Olivia would frequently get into physical fights. She describes her experience and her involvement in these fights.

I was not the most compliant child. I was engaged in quite a bit of physical altercations and fights, mostly in middle and high school. But when I look back on those experiences or incidents, every single time I engaged in a fight or started to fight, it was because I was taking up for someone else.

Olivia desired to advocate for others from an early age, and eventually, she channeled her frustrations and negative energy into activism. When Olivia shared her experiences, I think about the many children, unlike Olivia, who do not have the same opportunities because we inadvertently define them by their behavior and not their brilliance.

Olivia continued her schooling and attended Mayfield State University. She stated, “My grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles had big hopes and dreams for me.” As a first-generation college graduate, Olivia believes her experiences, challenges, and success had a positive impact on her younger cousins.

I was the oldest cousin on my dad’s side, not on my mom’s side, but on my dad’s side, the oldest cousin. And I feel like I kind of paved the way for some of my younger cousins now who are, which, you know, college graduates. One’s a state prosecutor and an attorney. You know, it’s just a number of things that I know that my cousins have shared, have really impacted their lives just based on the things that I went through and experienced.

Olivia successfully completed her undergraduate studies in special education at Mayfield State University and soon began her career in teaching.

Pathway to the Superintendency

I asked Olivia what brought her to the superintendency and she outlined her resume and provided more details about her professional experiences. Olivia began her teaching career in special education at the middle school level and later transitioned to high school. From the beginning, Olivia always supported students with disabilities. She stated, “I’ve always had this passion for advocacy and for students with disabilities.” During her time as a special education teacher, Olivia worked with 16-18 year old high school students who struggled to read. This experience with students was the impetus to seek a master’s degree in reading. Her decision to seek a graduate degree demonstrates her commitment to professional learning and building her own capacity. Soon after, she utilized her reading expertise as an elementary reading specialist and instructional coach.

Dr. Robinson accepted a district leadership position in the Office of Special Education because she still wanted to advocate for students with disabilities. She served as a coordinator, specialist, and director before assuming the Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Support role. She oversaw special education, gifted programs, professional learning, school improvement, and student services in her department. Dr. Robinson worked closely with the superintendent and served on the superintendent’s cabinet for 5 years. She shared with me that she desires the number two spot, right below the superintendent. Olivia stated, “I enjoy to this day to be number two. I like being at that cabinet level where I can just do the work, do it in the background. I don’t like being in the forefront.”

After 5 years as an assistant superintendent, Dr. Robinson needed a change, yet, she was certain the superintendency was not the change she desired. Olivia applied and was offered the Chief of Staff position in a large school district. She compared this role to a superintendent of a small school district.

My role as Chief of Staff was to train the school board, to help them understand their roles and responsibilities, and give them a structure for policy development. It was to work on that shared governance approach and do their onboarding when new board members were seated. A lot of my work with board governance being a key strategic advisor, and being a member of the superintendent's cabinet. But again, it was that background work, so much so that my colleagues used to joke and call me Olivia Pope.

Her colleagues referred to her as Olivia Pope, a fictional character from the television series, Scandal. "They're like, Hey, I need Olivia. I need to talk to you. I've got this thing going on in my department or, you know, in the community. Help me walk through this." As a fan of the series, I see the resemblance between Olivia Pope and Olivia Robinson because of their intellect and savviness. They both are problem solvers and ready to "set the world on fire."

One of the people that Dr. Robinson supervised in her role as Chief of Staff was the Director of Equity, who was appointed at the same time she began in the role. Before their arrival, the district did not intentionally focus on equity. Tensions began to arise around critical race theory, and Olivia described her district as "ground zero for anti-critical race theory movement." I asked her if this movement impacted her work.

It absolutely had an impact. The other thing I will say is being a Black woman in that chief of staff role in the district where I was, the previous chief of staff was a White male. There had been nothing but White male superintendents in that district. Coupled with

that, it was a very contentious community as it relates to race relations. So it definitely had an impact on my role as chief of staff, but also just my professional outlook on the state of education in certain communities.

Olivia and her husband agreed that this community was not the best for their family. “We were there for not even 2 or 3 months before we looked at each other and [said], we do not want to raise our children here.” Her family’s decision to leave the community and Olivia’s participation in a year-long superintendent leadership program led her to the superintendency.

The way that I kind of ventured into the superintendency was an exit strategy to get my family out of the community where I was serving as chief of staff ... that was my pathway to become a superintendent.

The Superintendency

I asked Dr. Robinson about the transition to the superintendent position. Dr. Robinson spoke about how her former roles, specifically the most recent one, the “training ground” for the superintendent position. Olivia was intentional in seeking a position that was the best fit.

I made sure that the superintendency that I applied for was a place where I could lead as my authentic self or were based on the leadership profile that I thought I could lead as my authentic self, which is how I ended up here.

Her first “a-ha” moment as superintendent was shortly after the insurrection on the Capitol. In previous roles, she was the person in the background writing the remarks for the superintendent and sending out messages to the community. Dr. Robinson remembers looking around and asking, “Who was going to do that for me?” The structures in Montana were different.

Previously, she was a part of a large organization with multiple levels of district leadership to help the superintendent. She was now the face of the district and did not have the same support.

She acknowledged that the superintendency was a complex position; however, the tumultuous events that have occurred the last few years had increased the complexity.

Superintendents across the country, regardless of race and gender and political affiliation, anything. Superintendents across the country are in difficult, difficult leadership times with the pandemic, with civil unrest, there so many things that have just gone, awry, if you will, for educational leaders. And it only is exacerbated for superintendents of color, particularly those of us who are females.

Context Matters

Montane City Schools is a small, relatively liberal and progressive school district serving less than 15,000 students. Contrary to what others see, Montane is a diverse community. Dr. Robinson explained socioeconomically, the school system is not as diverse but also notes that over 50% of her student population were students of color. More than half of her principals were Black and majority of the Black principals were female. Superintendent Robinson reflected on how her identity compared to the identities of student, teachers, and leaders in Montane.

You know, there's certainly students who—students and staff, I think have similar backgrounds and experiences. And I think it puts me in a position to serve our district well because our students and even some of our staff and administrators are able to see themselves in me and my leadership style and the experiences that I bring to the role.

Dr. Robinson described the context in Montane as “being in an area where there are seemingly, a collective commitment to equity and social justice action.” She continued,

I work in a school district that is a really high-performing school district, but we have longstanding and pervasive gaps. I'm trying to move our district from focusing on gaps

between student groups and the gaps to proficiency for our Black students, our LatinX students, our multilingual learners, and our EC students.

When I asked Superintendent Robinson about the availability of resources in her district, she quickly shared that Montane has abundant resources. “I would say I’m blessed in the district where I am as it relates to resources, human resources, financial, curricular, very blessed with that.”

Dr. Robinson’s arrival to the district was unique because she was appointed as superintendent in the midst of a global pandemic. I lived through leading a school during the pandemic, but cannot imagine the challenge of leading an entire school system.

The typical activities and that happen when a new superintendent transitions in, for example, getting to know the community, having town halls, community meetings, I had to do through a screen. I had to be creative about how I connected to the community, how I took time to do what I call listen, observe, and learn or LOL. I had to be really creative in how I approach that.

The Superintendent’s Role

Dr. Robinson stated that she is the CEO of her school district and often described her role the same way as people outside of education. She outlined her major responsibilities beyond recruiting and retaining teachers and administrators when discussing her role. Superintendent Robinson communicated expectations to stakeholders and stated that her responsibility is to “make sure that our strategic plan is lived out in action.” She used her strategic leadership skills to appropriately allocate and align resources with the district’s goals and action steps.

Superintendent Robinson also worked closely with the Montane City Schools Board of Education. Most board members were educators, and contrary to what others may believe, Dr.

Robinson viewed this as an asset. She admits that board members can “get into the weeds” because they know education intimately, but she believes it benefits her and the district. “They speak my language, and philosophically as it relates to equity work and social justice action and what it’s going to take to close gaps that we know exist. My board and I are aligned.”

The board and superintendent have a dichotomous relationship because the board of education can hire and fire the superintendent, yet the superintendent spends time training, coaching, and holding board members accountable. Her job was to “equip them with information so that they in their spheres of influence can help move the work as well.” Dr. Robinson talked about the complexity of the superintendent and the board relationship.

Another major part of my role is supporting the school board, but also making sure that there’s a clear understanding of what my role is, the role of my team and what their role the role of the school board. Part of that is just clear communication and expectation, clarity. As a superintendent, it’s kind of difficult because you ... It’s a fine balance because you’re, you’re kind of training and holding your boss or bosses accountable. Right. So it’s a fine balance.

Dr. Robinson demonstrated a commitment to building capacity in others. She believed that it was one of her responsibilities to build teams where people make tough decisions. Superintendent Robinson explained that the board is not the only group of people she coached. She also coached her cabinet so that they could effectively engage in shared decision-making. Similarly, I invested time in building the collective efficacy of my leadership team. It is a vital part of our organizational identity. Dr. Robinson described her experiences with her cabinet early on in the superintendency and how she shifted the culture around leadership.

I think in this district, people were used to sitting down at a table and telling the superintendent what the problems were and waiting with bated breath for the superintendent to tell them what to do. And that's another thing that I've had to shift the culture. We don't pay people what we pay them to sit at the cabinet or the district level to not make tough decisions. Right. And so early on, one of my main questions was when people would bring up problems ... I would say, I don't know, what's your recommendation? Another part of my job is to build capacity in others, whether they want to be a superintendent one day or not. But I really believe in collective efficacy, which is another one of our core values in our strategic plan.

Leadership Style

I asked Superintendent Robinson to speak about her passions in education, and there were two recurring themes that emerged from her stories. She shared with me, "So I am most passionate about wellness for our young people and what we call in my school district social justice action, which is one of the core values of our strategic plan." She defined social justice and explained how it is connected to her leadership.

To me, [it] is really about centering equity in all of our actions and not just again, we do a great job at talking about equity, but really seeing it in action. As a school district, we believe that critical consciousness helps us to recognize injustices from the past, but also present injustices. Right? And for me, it's about empowering our students and staff to address those injustices together. There's a whole lot there's more to it, but in a nutshell, that's what social justice action means.

Superintendent Robinson described how she leads and believed that others would generally describe her leadership similarly. She believed that leadership is about people.

I would describe my leadership as relational and collaborative. There's this quote I love about being committed to your decisions but flexible in your approach. And that's how I would describe my leadership. I'm also a relational leader, one who likes to roll up my sleeves and get out there with people. One of the things that I committed to my school and district leaders when I first arrived and continue to remind them of is that I'm the type of person that's going to do things with people, not to them or for them.

Superintendent Robinson noted that her school community would see her as a cultural leader because she invests time in shaping the culture of the community. Dr. Robinson often told her team, "The thing that frustrates me the most is when adult issues get in the way of what kids need." Before her leadership in Montane, the culture was adult-centered. "This is a district [that's] been used to the adults getting a lot of attention and getting their way." The adults (i.e., teachers, parents, board of education) have a powerful voice, but two most important voices were missing—students and school leaders. Superintendent Robinson shifted the culture to focus on students, and her goal is "keeping every single decision with students at the center."

Dr. Robinson created a superintendent's student group to elevate the voices of students and include them in the decision-making process. The ambassadors are approximately 40 high school students who meet with the superintendents and share what is most important to them. She declared that this is the best part of her job and is most proud of "bringing their voice to the decision-making table."

I am most proud of the manner in which we have centered student voice. I tell my team, and when I say team, I mean school and district leaders. But I tell school and district leaders all the time. As adults, we can argue about data all day, every day, and we can have different opinions. But the one thing we can't argue about is student voice or argue

with the student voice. I am most proud of the way in which we put student voice at the forefront without compromising the perspectives of our adults who we know we want to invest in.

I related to Dr. Robinson's stance on keeping the focus on students without compromising the needs of the adults. Students are the focus; however, I believe educational leaders must also recognize the importance and necessity of supporting educators who work closely with students.

Superintendent Robinson shaped the district's culture by redesigning structures and systems. "The structures and systems and accountability have probably been the biggest challenge for other people as we've made that culture shift." From the outside, people do not see her organization's lack of structures and systems.

My school district is considered the number one school district in the state where I am, and the people on the [periphery] don't understand the level of chaos or the lack of structure and systems that have been long-standing here. They just wouldn't believe it because we're high-performing.

Superintendent Robinson and I talked about how the culture of the district has shaped her leadership. She believed that the culture in the community influenced her leadership style globally; however, she spoke about making adjustments to her leadership style.

I would say that I've made adjustments to my leadership style. It's on a case-by-case basis ... You just have to be adaptable and flexible in how you approach problems of practice as a superintendent.

Race, Gender, and Social Justice

Superintendent Robinson talked about how she accepted the superintendent appointment because she wanted to find a space where she could lead as her authentic self. In Montane, she

felt she had the opportunity to lead authentically; however, she recognized that has not always been the case in her previous positions. She acknowledged that superintendents of color are silenced because they cannot always say what they want to say. This is not the reality for Dr. Robinson, but she always has to be cautious. Superintendent Robinson talked about a major challenge for Black superintendents and leaders, “There’s this underlying perception. I think that we have to cater to what a white or a pop culture, Like that we can’t lead as our authentic selves.” As superintendent dispelled this perception by leading leadership development for Black leaders and helping them find their voice.

I try really hard to be intentional about connecting with our black school leaders and district leaders and letting them know that their voice matters, that they are leaders of leaders, that their skin color, gender, their sexual identity or whatever does not dictate how they lead. What I mean by that is there are, of course, in any culture or any community, there’s this dominant mindset, if you will, or collective mindset. I try to be intentional about the work I do with my school leaders and leadership development to encourage them to lead as their authentic selves and let them know that the decisions they make and the manner in which they lead, I’m going to be there to support them, as will my leadership team at the district level.

Superintendent Robinson discussed other challenges that are unique to Black women superintendents. She shared experiences of how others have questioned her credibility, minimized her experiences and educational background, or disrespected her when they intentionally addressed her as Mrs. Robinson instead of Dr. Robinson. In recalling the ways that she had been oppressed, Superintendent Robinson referenced the Malcolm X quote, “The most disrespected person is a Black woman.” She emphasizes that this is real life for her and other

Black women. She also mentioned how others have made false accusations and erroneous statements about her, and she felt like she was under attack. “There are distractions, attempted distractions, the attempted attacks just because I happen to be a Black female leader ... there are certainly barriers external to our organization, but also internal. But there’s nothing that we can’t overcome.”

Despite the struggles, Dr. Robinson remembered that these were distractions, and she leaned on the people who cared for her.

I talked with a number of mentors and ... every single person had to kind of just encourage me because there are times where you run into situations like that as a leader of color. You have to remember those are just distractions, and you have to remember who you are, what you stand for. Sometimes people who either have your best interests at heart have to remind you who you are so that you don’t second guess yourself. So I say that to say leading as my authentic self at times has brought more attention to me in a way where people would start questioning my leadership, my credentials, you know, who I am, how I lead. I believe that is because I am a Black female. And this would not have happened if it were a white male superintendent.

As I listened to Superintendent Robinson provide details of these horrific attacks on her, I could not help but feel the heaviness she must have felt in this situation. I was amazed by her strength and resiliency. It was difficult for me to comprehend how I would navigate these same experiences. I wanted to believe that in a diverse and liberal community, Black people would not have to endure these attacks, but we know better. We have seen, heard, or experienced it ourselves. If this is Dr. Robinson’s experience, what are the experiences of Black women leaders when they are not in a space where they can lead authentically?

Dr. Robinson reflected on her previous roles and stated that she has had similar experiences in other senior-level positions. In a few instances, she also experienced attacks by people who looked like her. Dr. Robinson recalled one experience when she was the Director of Exceptional Children.

I've had people send me pictures of a real lynching and say, the blood of Black children is on my hands. And their reference was discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities because I was the leader of special education at that time. I've had people in school board meetings tell me and other black female leaders ... come out of the house and stop being a house Negro. I've had members of certain community groups that are conservative put things in the newspaper or make public [comments] about my leadership or say that I only care about Black children.

Superintendent Robinson's experiences fueled her dedication and commitment to social justice leadership. She spoke about changing mindsets as a way to lead for social justice.

I'm really passionate about what some people used to call, are probably still called those kids, and I was one of them. I always tell my team and people that I work with that nothing really gets at me more than when adults label kids based on their circumstances rather than their potential. I'm really passionate about changing those mindsets through a social justice action lens and then making sure that our young people are mentally and physically healthy and well.

On the other hand, Dr. Robinson stated that her challenge for social justice leadership is about helping her people shift from conversation to action.

I would say the challenge that I find with promoting social justice is bringing other people along to, as my grandma used to say, not just talk about it, be about it. Bringing

other people along is a fine dance, and I spent a lot of time coaching others on how to do it. I want to say others, primarily my cabinet team, on how to be strategic about bringing people along to be about social justice action.

I asked Dr. Robinson if being an African American woman has been to her advantage as a superintendent. There was a long pause before she responded, “Wow. It’s sad that I have to think this in depth. Give me a moment.” She continued to ponder this question but finally responded with, “Oh. Honestly. No, I don’t think so. In working with the Black community and being able to engage with the Black community, I would say that has its advantages, but that, that’s my community.”

Despite having to relive these negative experiences when she told me her story, Superintendent Robinson inspired hope. She stated confidently that these challenges can be overcome. “But it’s going to take time. It’s going to take resilience, and it’s going to take that grit that I talked about in my mom.”

Communication and Supports

In her high-profile position, Dr. Robinson understood the importance of being politically savvy and intentional with communications. She stated that her superintendent’s cabinet tailors communications based on their audience. She spoke about the necessity of strategic communication and how Black female superintendents must temper their communications in a way different from White leaders, regardless of gender. Sometimes, she reminds her communication officer, a white male, of this very same thing.

There are things that White superintendents, male and female, can say or say in a way that I cannot. And so I have to be strategic about how I get the same messaging across, but in a different way. Whether I say it differently, whether I connect with someone who

is not a person of color and get them to say it or, you know, it just, you really have to put a lot of thought and strategy into how you get your messaging across or sometimes even your vision across, depending on who the audience is. I think it's a little bit of both. But certainly, for a superintendent [who] is a Black female, you have to go the extra mile in your strategic communication. And it takes more time, it takes more.

African American women superintendents are almost non-existent, which limits the opportunity to learn from other Black female executives. When I asked Dr. Robinson about mentoring, she recalled several key mentors who supported her. She highlighted that all of her mentors have been either Black men or White women. I had a similar experience with mentors, but I have had some Black female principals who served as thought partners. Dr. Robinson had mentors and colleagues with whom she connected; however, she shared that none of her mentors could truly understand her lived experiences. "And it takes too much time to explain and give context for people to really get it." She continued,

When you need to make a phone call for somebody to get it, you need somebody who's going to get it or truly understand. You don't have a large group of people to pick from. So, when I say, of my mentors who are not females of color, I still have to do some explaining. And in those conversations, as they're giving me advice or what have you, I often have to say, Yeah, but that's different for me as a woman, or that's different for me as a Black woman. And so that intersectionality of race and gender is key.

Dr. Robinson identified other supports and a factors that have contributed to her success. Her faith and belief in God was the number one factor. "I'm person of faith, and I know that my steps have been ordered, and I am where I am, and I've had the success that I've had because of, my belief in God." Secondly, she indicated that her professional experiences have strengthened

her ability to endure ongoing criticisms; negative experiences are another reason. “The other thing is having experiences throughout life that have allowed me to be thick-skinned in order to do this work.” Finally, Dr. Robinson attributed her success to keeping a student-focused mindset. She advocated for students who experienced the same challenges as she did in school. These three factors, taken together, contributed to her success as a superintendent.

Conclusion

Dr. Olivia Robinson’s story was authentic, courageous, and resilient. She emphasized several times that she is one of the few African American women sitting in the superintendent’s seat in her state. I asked her why she thinks no more Black women are in this role.

Because elected and appointed school boards across the country, for the most part, are not people of color, and that’s just my assessment, but I would be interested to know what the racial and gender makeup is of school boards across the country. And then, like I said, it goes back to the Malcolm X quote that I just said. You know, he said, the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. And so there is a belief, I think there’s a belief that either Black women can’t lead or Black women, that we’re so good at what we do, there’s resistance to putting us in positions of perceived power. And I think that there [is] some strategy behind that. Depending on the area in which those elections are taking place. And, you know, that’s an interesting question to reflect on. I read an article several weeks ago that talked about the turnover in the superintendency, and I can’t quote you the exact stats, but essentially the article was saying that superintendents of color, particularly female superintendents of color who are being fired or who have retired or what have you, are being replaced by white men. So there’s something going on. Even though there is—there’s seemingly there was some progress, maybe a little bit

of progress with, you know, putting more women of color in the seat of the superintendency. We're starting to regress.

At the end of our time together, I asked Superintendent Robinson what was next in her career. She revealed her passion for coaching and mentoring. "I thought about doing this very thing that we're talking about, and that's coaching and mentoring and, you know, providing support to female leaders of color in education and not just the superintendency, but school and district leaders." She also provided advice to Black women educational leaders and to those who aspire to the superintendency.

You probably hear this in leadership preparation programs, but fit matters. They're oftentimes people who want to be a superintendent or who want to go into district leadership are kind of just looking for the title. And the title is irrelevant. The context in which you're going to serve is what's most important. I always encourage people not to just apply for applying sake and to really look deep at those leadership profiles and determine, again, where you believe you can lead as your authentic self.

Several recurring themes emerged throughout Dr. Robinson's story that represent her Black Girl Magic. Her Black Girl Magic is captured through her unwavering commitment to live and thrive as her authentic self. She unapologetically tells her story with the intention to empower others, especially those who do not always have a platform to share their own experiences. Her authenticity is a gift to herself and to the others that she serves in both her personal and professional life. Superintendent Robinson's bridging the gap for others and her efforts to elevate the voices of others reveals her Black Girl Magic.

CHAPTER VI: PORTRAIT OF DR. CARRIE BROOME

Dr. Carrie Broome is the superintendent of Brier Creek City Schools. Dr. Broome has served in two public school districts for 8 years as a superintendent. She has consistently been sought after and recruited for various leadership positions throughout her professional career. Dr. Broome has a proven record of extraordinary leadership, dating back to the classroom.

During our interviews, Dr. Broome and I interfaced virtually with our cameras turned on; however, we chose a time to meet when Superintendent Broome was home, and I interviewed from my work office. When I saw her, Dr. Broome had a classic, wavy bob hairstyle and casual attire; she wore a silver necklace and a pair of small silver hoop earrings. Sometimes when we talked, she would lean into the camera, bring her hands together, one hand over the other, and gently rest her chin. Other times, she would lean in to talk to me with her arms folded and resting on the table before her. I mostly noticed her linguistic patterns and how Dr. Broome responded to my questions. After I posed a question, she would pause and then thoughtfully and carefully craft her response. She shared a recurring message about “leveling the playing field” for kids. This message permeates throughout her story and journey as a superintendent.

Childhood and School Experiences

Carrie grew up in “the projects” and was raised by her single mother. She did not explain what she meant by “the projects,” but it is commonly used to describe subsidized apartment buildings. Although I did not grow up in a similar neighborhood, I knew what she was referring to because my grandmother lived in the projects, and my family spent most Saturdays there. Carrie clearly remembered her mother working a lot and that academics was not a priority.

And so we were never pushed in academics; it was never you better sit down and do your homework. It was never—we were just scared of her, and so we were so scared that we did what we were supposed to do.

Carrie's mother and her family's circumstances inspired her to want more. She talked about the influence of her mother. "And so I would say she helped me to realize that I wanted more than what we had." Carrie also talked about her Aunt Wanda with admiration and explained that she was one of the great people in her life that supported her.

Aunt Wanda, my mother's sister, who lived the life that everybody in the family wanted. But she was so very humble. She is so very humbled. And she's got a fabulous marriage that, you know, just the perfect, ideal family situation. And she did not hesitate ever to help us with anything that we needed, whether it was, you know, I don't know, a new dress for a school play or whatever, it was my Aunt Wanda [who] was there to help with those things. So I guess you could say there were some great people or some great people in my life who just wanted to give us what we needed so that they could level the playing field for us.

Carrie decided at an early age that she wanted to be a teacher. In fifth grade, she remembered inviting other kids to her house, and she would play school. When I asked her about people who inspired her, she spoke about elementary, middle, and high school teachers who made a difference in her life. One of Carrie's most influential elementary school teachers was Ms. Martha Falls. When Carrie said her name, her face lit up. It was truly heartwarming to see her smile and to see the joy in her eyes. I know how it feels to remember someone special and still experience the emotion of how that person made you feel. Carrie proceeded to tell me about Ms. Falls.

She kind of adopted a group of us from the projects. There may have been about five or six of us female students. And she showed us that there was life outside of our projects and the neighborhood in which we lived. And so she lived in Cantina Beach, and she would take us on weekends, sometimes just up to Cantina Beach. We'd hang out at her house and meet her family. And, you know, she wanted us to see that there was something more than what we currently had. And I think that that was just to encourage us to keep pushing and to set some goals for ourselves that we didn't typically see in our neighborhood and in our families.

Carrie named three additional teachers, both elementary and middle school teachers, who had a significant impact on her life. She described how they saw her greatness and how their support and advocacy set her up for success.

They were true advocates for a little African American girl who came from the projects and, you know, was kind of, you know, falling through the cracks, for lack of a better word. And they saw something in me. And so they pushed me, made sure that when I went on to middle school that I got the right classes, I got the right teachers. And just made the world a difference for me.

At an early age, Carrie recognized that some of the children in her neighborhood faced significant challenges, which consequently negatively impacted their school life. Unlike her experience with trusted adults, the other kids did not have someone fighting for what they needed.

I did find when I got into middle school that there were kids in my neighborhood in the projects who were not performing as well in school. A lot of them were facing some

pretty dire situations, and I just thought that if there was somebody in their corner or in a school that they could really get the attention that they needed.

In high school, Carrie met the teacher Doris Cunningham, who inspired her to become a CTE (Career and Technical Education) teacher. She described Ms. Cunningham as a “phenomenal” teacher who built amazing relationships with all students. Students knew that Ms. Cunningham was the type of teacher who would be there for them. Carrie shared with me that Ms. Cunningham made learning fun and competitive in the classroom. From that point on, Carrie wanted to be a CTE teacher, and she went on to make that dream come true. She graduated from Stone University with a Bachelor’s degree in Business Education, and a few years later, she became a high school CTE teacher, just like Ms. Cunningham.

Pathway to the Superintendency

Carrie began her career in education as a teacher. She accepted two non-traditional teaching roles during the first 6 years of her teaching career. Her first position was in Stone Public Schools, teaching adults who were older than she was. She also worked in a school specifically for pregnant teens. Since childhood, Carrie displayed empathy for others and their circumstances. She worked with students who needed an alternative pathway in both teaching roles. When listening to her story, I noticed how Carrie positioned herself in spaces, consciously or subconsciously, to fulfill her passion for leveling the playing field for kids.

After working in a non-traditional school, Carrie accepted a high school CTE teacher position. While teaching there, students saw her as someone they could go to, even students who did not have Carrie as a teacher. She spoke about how the high school was not meeting student needs.

I realized that there were kids who were not really getting what they needed in that high school because there were so many of them running to me, telling me how they had been mistreated. They needed me to step in. Some of these kids weren't even mine. And so I realized then that maybe I can help these kids [in] a different way.

During Carrie's high school teaching experience, the assistant superintendent asked her to take on a summer school principal position. She did not have any experience as an administrator, but she assumed this role for a few summers. She also worked as a night school principal before accepting an assistant principal position. I asked Carrie when she decided she wanted to pursue school leadership.

I never aspired to be more than a teacher. And so when I realized that there were some things that I could not do for my kids who needed something or needed somebody in their corner. And then when Dr. Samuel Jensen, I guess he saw it before I did when he asked me to take on the summer school principalship role ... I really had to think about it because I didn't know if I was ready to leave the classroom. When he came back to say, I think we're ready for you. And so I just kind of realized it was in the best interest of kids.

Like her grade school teachers, Carrie's supervisors recognized her leadership potential. Soon, Carrie was asked to serve as the Human Resource Coordinator for a couple of years before her superintendent transitioned her to Piper's Ridge High School in Stone County Schools.

I got the call from our then superintendent who said, I need you. I need you at this high school. We've got a large group of African American kids at this high school who he thought were not getting the things that they needed. And so I went on to Pipers Ridge High School in Stone County Schools, where the demographics ranged from extreme poverty to the kids in the system or in the city who were the mayor's children, the city

councilman's children, city attorney's children and so we had from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Carrie had completed her doctoral degree in educational leadership and was officially Dr. Carrie Broome. Dr. Broome had spent her entire career in Stone County Schools until she received another recruitment call. This time, Dr. Broome received a call from an out-of-state superintendent. The superintendent shared that he had a conversation with her superintendent and assistant superintendent at a conference. Both administrators spoke highly of Dr. Broome and her readiness to become a principal. Dr. Broome did not know anything about the superintendent's district, not to mention that it was out of state. In 2006, she was selected as the new principal of Hopewell High School. "And there it was ... and so [I] went on to what I believe to be one of my favorite positions of all time as a high school principal at Hopewell."

During her tenure at Hopewell, Dr. Broome received recognition for her outstanding principal leadership. She stated that she was most proud of her school being recognized as the most improved high school in the district for 2 consecutive years. After approximately 4 years, Dr. Broome moved into district leadership, where she serves as executive director, responsible for approximately 40 schools. When Dr. Broome reflected on her role as executive director, she told me, "I was most proud of the fact that we had more schools in our region who were performing better than they had been before I arrived." As I listened to Dr. Broome tell me her career pathway, I recognized how the different roles prepared her for the superintendency. She talked about how each position was a great experience, but after the second executive director's position, she stated, "I think I can do something bigger than this." The next stop was the superintendency.

The Superintendency

In 2015, Dr. Broome was named the superintendent of Camden City Schools. After a few years, she accepted the superintendent position of Brier Creek City Schools. Throughout her professional career, she dedicated her life to leveling the playing field for students. When I asked what she was most passionate about in education she talked about students and understanding that their circumstances impact their ability to access school.

I think we have some kids out there who come from some pretty interesting and some very different circumstances beyond their control. And I think that we have a responsibility to level the playing field for them when they come into schools so that they can focus on learning and doing what they're supposed to do.

Dr. Broome talked about her transition to and preparation for the superintendency. She reflected on her journey and expressed gratitude for all her experiences.

I don't know that there was anything I wish could have happened differently. I came into my first superintendency in a really small school district that was smaller than the region that I supervised ... and so there was nothing there that I didn't—that I wished I had. And I think one of the things for me, it was—I was fortunate to have had those other experiences that helped me in this much smaller school district because we only had four schools [in Camden], and I had just come from an area where I was supervising 37 or 38 schools. It would probably have been very different for me had I been leading a small school district going to a large district as a superintendent. But I think with this—the skill set I was fortunate to develop, I don't think there was anything that I wish I could have had.

Superintendent Broome told me about two events in Camden that she experienced in her first year as superintendent:

When I arrived, Kisha, I'm going to tell you, this is the scariest thing that has ever happened to me. Well, let me take that back. There were two things in [Camden]. The first was my first year as superintendent. I'm sitting at my desk and I'm looking outside and I said, what is going on? And I walked to my window and there was snow falling. And I asked myself, Oh, my God, what am I supposed to do? ... Luckily, I had a cohort of superintendents in the [Southeast Regional] Consortium that I work with, that I could pick up a phone and call. And I said, Taylor, it's snowing. What are we supposed to do? Who makes this call?

She also spoke about a situation concerning funds. Within a few months of Dr. Broome's arrival, she received a letter from the state department regarding their district's fund balance. At the time, the fund balance was almost non-existent. Dr. Broome talked about how it was a frightening experience.

And I thought, what in the world have I walked into ... And I thought, this is ridiculous. And so in one year, we were able to turn that around where we started improving dramatically our fund balance. But we had to develop a plan, send it to the state. And I thought, this is wild.

During her tenure in Camden, Dr. Broome regained the district's financial stability and moved the school district out of low-performing school status after one year. Superintendent Broome was most proud of this accomplishment. I have worked in a school that was designated low-performing. I understand the internal and external factors that impact the school and the

challenge to improve school performance. These accomplishments in Camden City Schools capture the essence of her leadership.

Context Matters

Dr. Broome led two small school districts, Camden City Schools and Brier Creek City Schools. Each school system had four and six schools, respectively. Superintendent Broome provided context so that I can better understand the schools that she has served. In Camden, all of her Board of Education members were African American; in Brier Creek, approximately half were Black. She shared that both systems are situated in high-poverty communities, and most students in each district were students of color. Concerning poverty, she explained,

We have a very high poverty rate in Brier Creek. We're about 90% free and reduced lunch. And so, you know, I've got some staff who don't quite understand the kind of issues that come with poverty. And the fact that, you know, these kids, they need something different. They need—they need to have their needs met, first of all, before we can really get them teaching it, you know, in the mindset of teaching and learning.

Superintendent Broome shared that each of the districts that she led was unique; however, they shared a similar school of thought. She described her experience leading in a small, rural community.

Sometimes, unfortunately, if you're in a really small rural area, sometimes the focus really isn't on teaching and learning because the folks on the board haven't had great educational experiences themselves. And so the attention falls on athletics and cheerleading and that kind of stuff. And so I have been very frustrated in that I personally believe that teaching and learning is what provides kids with the opportunities to do bigger and greater, bigger and better things for themselves. And that athletics is second.

But in really small school districts, and sometimes you've had board members who don't believe the same thing. You know, for them, it's about providing those "Friday Night Light" opportunities and making sure the basketball court is ready for kids for the basketball season. And it's been very difficult [for] me that in the last—in these two superintendencies, I have never been challenged ... on academics.

Superintendent Broome recognized the community's needs and believed that schools must adapt to those needs. She does not believe in a one-size-fits-all approach and repeatedly stated, "They need something different." Superintendent Broome also grappled with the dissonance between her leadership goals and priorities and what the community deemed important. The dissonance has shaped her role as a superintendent.

The Superintendent's Role

Dr. Broome stated, "It is my responsibility to leave a school district better than I found it." This quote captures the broad vision of how she intends to impact her schools and community. When I talked with Dr. Broome about her responsibilities as a superintendent, she spoke about several key responsibilities yet heavily emphasized that teaching and learning was her priority and focus. She stated, "My ultimate responsibility is to teaching and learning in the district ... my role is to ensure that we are providing a K-12 curriculum and opportunities for kids to advance academically." In order to make this happen, Dr. Broome talked about building teacher capacity, providing professional development, teacher working conditions, and teacher retention. As it relates to teacher capacity, she wanted to provide teachers with "the skill set and the toolbox to maximize teaching and learning in the classroom." I related to Dr. Broome because these topics were critical areas of focus in my school and greatly impacted student learning.

Superintendent Broome mentioned that she was also responsible for addressing facility needs. Addressing facility needs was important to her because she cared about creating better learning environments for students. She recalled arriving in both school districts and seeing old, dilapidated buildings that have simply been neglected.

In both school districts where I have been as superintendent, both had significantly, had significant deferred maintenance issues, let me say that. And the moneys were not spent where I believe they should have been spent to the point where some facilities were so old and so run down that you are putting Band-Aids on things because you don't want to spend the money to replace the boiler or replace it this year.

Dr. Broome talked about her responsibility to work with the Board of Education.

Superintendent Broome shared that she collaborated with the board but sometimes pivoted to ensure everyone was on the same page.

Sometimes, there are people who really just don't understand, and they're going to need some hand-holding and a lot more explanation than most. And luckily for me, I do have three or four educators on my board, where four out of seven who are former educators. And so that's been helpful.

She also discussed the dynamic relationship between the superintendent and their board members. In her work with the board, Dr. Broome shared her experience with conflicting agendas and how some members had a different vision for the school system.

... Those who are not former educators are the ones who are pushing for things other than teaching and learning. And so, yes, I find that a lot of times, I do have to pivot. It gets really tough when you have folks who are fighting you unnecessarily because they have

hidden agendas about things. And so—and those are typically my folks who are not the educators who were on the board.

Superintendent Broome highlighted that her responsibilities were ultimately determined by the board. Last year, her board members decided to begin major renovations and assigned her as the project manager.

And so that last year was a very interesting year for me because that's not why I took that job. And for me, my ultimate responsibility is to teaching and learning in the district. And so, as I told my board after the project was completed, that that took me totally off of teaching and learning, and it took way too much time to supervise an athletic complex overhaul.

Leadership Style

Dr. Broome believed that it takes bold and courageous leadership in the superintendency. As she talked to me about the development of their athletic complex, she told me that she had to use her voice to position herself to do her best work.

And so—and I got kind of bold, and I told them I wasn't doing it again because I really thought that there were things that I could have done differently or that I could have done to support teaching and learning that I did not do because of the other responsibilities.

I asked Dr. Broome how she would describe her leadership and if others would describe her similarly. Superintendent Broome highlighted specific characteristics that represent her leadership. Building strong, positive relationships was at the top of her list. She built strong relationships with stakeholders within the school district and community.

I just kind of pride myself on being able to build relationships with different types of people. And I tend to try and surround myself with people who are not always like-

minded but who have that same kind of focus and vision for the district. They may—we may not agree on how to get there, but we all want the same thing.

Dr. Broome also described herself as “the cheerleader” of the district. As the spokesperson of the district, she wanted to maintain positive communications about her students and schools.

I think a superintendent has to be a cheerleader for the district because a lot of times, people see the district very differently than what it really is. So that sometimes there are perceptions that people have that really are way, way off base. And I think the superintendent has to be the person who continues to keep the school district out in the forefront of people’s minds very positively.

Superintendent Broome shaped the community’s perception of the school system. Her student, teacher, and community advisory groups were examples of how she connected with key stakeholders and how she included their voices in decision-making.

I’ve built three advisory boards within our district. I’ve got a parent, a community advisory board, I’ve got a teacher advisory board and I have a student advisory board. And we talk about everything because those are going to be the people who go back into the community and say, No, it’s not like that. This is what’s going on, this is what’s happening, and they can bring anything to me. I told them they are my eyes and my ears and they will help me solve problems that are happening within the community or to try and address perceptions that are in the community that are just not accurate.

As she continued describing her leadership, Dr. Broome explained that she works with people with expertise in areas she may not have. She believed that being the boss did not mean

that you have all the answers. Superintendent Broome shared that she was a collaborative leader and worked to build strong teams.

I'm a collaborator. I do not believe that simply because I have a title and a lot of responsibilities that I'm the one who knows it all, who makes all the decisions. I make sure that I surround myself with people who know things that I don't know or who can help me. I have been blessed to be able to put together some fabulous teams. And so I, we collaborate. We collaborate frequently. They are part of decision-making with me.

Race, Gender, and Social Justice

Superintendent Broome talked about the racial diversity of her teaching staff. She has approximately 45% African American and 40% White teachers. I asked her how race and gender impacted her leadership. She said, "I don't think it, I don't think personally, that my race has hindered or helped me in these two districts." I posed a follow up question asking her if she has ever felt oppressed based on race or gender. Dr. Broome described her interactions with the African American males.

I would say yes, and I'll speak specifically about my current board. I think because of the male, the African American male domination on my board that I felt like there were things that I could not do. Because often I get demands. And I have to sit back. I have to process, and I may not be able to give them everything, the two of them, everything that they demand. But I have to find a way to have the conversation. And I often, Kisha, found myself having to pull out policy, speak to folks about law because some of the things that I had been asked or demanded that I do are really against policy and in some instances have been unethical. And I'm just not—I'm not going out like that. And so instead of getting into this argument right then and there about not being able to do it, I

go back and I do some research, and I try to help them to understand why those things can't be done. Sometimes it helps. Sometimes, they really just don't care.

She also explained that as a principal and director, her supervisors and most principals she supervised identified as white. However, she believed her colleagues' race did not impact her work.

Both of my regional superintendents were white. Majority of the principals that I supported were White. Most of the board at one time was White, with a White superintendent. And so I didn't. I didn't. I don't think I fared any differently. I don't think that there were instances where I felt uncomfortable or that I couldn't do my job and be me.

I asked Superintendent Broome to share her thoughts on why there were few African American women superintendents. She concluded,

It's changing a little bit because people are not staying as long in the superintendency as they used to. And so, for one, I think that the vacancies were not there before, you know, 15–20 years ago. The vacancies just were not there. And if they were, boards were really not looking for African American females for whatever reason. I think times are changing, and people are starting to see African American females in more principal roles, more central office roles that make them more appealing as superintendents. And so I think with the experiences that we gain, I think people will see our worth as superintendents.

Challenges

Superintendent Broome acknowledged that politics was infused in everything that she encountered. When I asked what frustrates her, she immediately said, “The politics, the red tape,

way more than I ever thought there would be. I think there are way too many obstacles in the way of doing what's right by kids." I also asked her how she navigates the political landscape and she admits it is a struggle.

That's a real struggle for me because I'm not a politician. And I didn't get in this to be a politician. And I want the main thing to stay the main thing and the focus to be the focus. And so I find myself in a fight, often a very respectful fight, but a fight nonetheless, to try and keep what we do, focused on what we're supposed to be doing.

Superintendent Broome spoke about negative experiences that key stakeholders spearheaded. These experiences were filled with attacks, manipulation, and false truths. She recalled one experience with a key stakeholder who had been very vocal and suggested that Dr. Broome was not the best choice for the superintendency seat. Luckily, she had allies on the board and community who did not share his opinion.

I find myself in a situation where it feels like I am, like there's an attempt to manipulate. There is always an inaccurate story that goes out, that people are now finding that [the key stakeholder] has a habit of doing because his intent is to try and say that I am not for athletics in Brier Creek. And I'm thinking, you know, you're right. I'm really not the athletic superintendent, even though I played sports and got stepdaughters who are all athletes. And I think that we have student athletes and they have to be students first. But the politics, I don't like it. And so it has actually made me reconsider whether or not this is what I want to continue to do, because I feel like it's getting in the way of what I'm supposed to be there for.

Dr. Broome did not use the term equity, but she frequently talked about how educators and schools must provide what students need. I asked her about how social justice plays a part in her leadership. She responded to me and further explains the barriers around this topic.

I would say yes, it does. I think our children need to understand that they have rights to great educational opportunities. And I think one of the things that we have been facing in Brier Creek is that there are folks, some folks in our schools that don't understand cultural diversity. And they believe that all children should just sit down, shut up, and do what they say. Do what teachers say without, just without question?

Dr. Broome faced the challenge that teachers and other key stakeholders did not know the students and community they served. She recounted a conversation that she had with a teacher who was frustrated with the Black students in her classroom.

I've had a teacher who has said repeatedly that African American kids are disrespecting her. And so, you know, we finally get down, and we're having this conversation. What do you mean that they are disrespecting you? And she would say things like, well, they won't stop talking when I tell them to stop talking. When I ask them to do something, they ask me why ... when I tell them something is wrong, they want to know what's wrong about it. You know, I'm like, that's not an issue with African American kids. That's just kids trying to understand why they're being asked to do something, but that teacher [believes] it's disrespectful.

I asked Dr. Broome to elaborate on her dialogue with the teacher and I wondered if this person was a teacher of color or if there was a cultural mismatch between students and the teacher.

It's the Caucasian teachers [who] are struggling to understand it ... One of the things we're working on is that we have some pretty strong African American teachers in the district who have gotten to the point where they're very frustrated that some of the kids are being treated a certain way by some Caucasian teachers. But luckily for us, we have been able to provide some learning opportunities for teachers as it relates to cultural diversity. We did a poverty simulation in the district where some just refused to participate, but some said, oh my God, this was truly an eye-opening experience. I think sometimes they forget about the fact that outside circumstances do play a huge part in how focused kids are when they come to school.

Dr. Broome did not only see the lack of cultural awareness with teachers, but also with board members. As an example, Dr. Broome told me about an idea that was brought to the attention of the board. She proposed an alternative night school to the board to promote student access and opportunities to school. The conversation unfolded as such:

We started talking about maybe trying to provide a night school opportunity for kids who were needing to work, who had children at home that they needed to take care of, and just couldn't come to school during the day. And [a key stakeholder] said, well, coming to school is their responsibility. What are their parents doing? Why can't their parents? And I kept thinking, oh, my God, you don't know our babies.

Other key stakeholders had a conversation with this influential figure later; however, this was an example of the obstacles that Superintendent Broome encountered in her role.

Dr. Broome spoke about the dissension with her African American male board members. When asked about the White men and women who serve on the board, she stated, "They don't cause any issues at all. They don't. They let me do my job. They ask questions when they need

clarification. But I've not had any issues." Superintendent Broome described the conflict with Black males in more detail.

For me, what has been challenging is working with specifically African American male board members who—they believe they are dominant and that you should do what they tell you to do. And so that has been a little difficult for me, especially when they don't have education backgrounds, and their focus areas tend to be very different than the true meaning of schools. So we had a lot of issues or focus areas in those two districts around athletics and cheerleaders and at—and I could care less about cheerleaders or athletics. And my focus mainly is teaching and learning. And so it has been difficult trying to deal with those very dominant personalities, especially when I can be very headstrong, and we often butt heads on what was the right thing to do.

Despite the challenges, Dr. Broome continued to demonstrate success. I asked her to talk about factors she believed contributed to her success. She pinpointed her resiliency and relationships as contributing factors.

I think my resilience, because there are a lot of things that we have to face and deal with as African American female superintendents. I think my commitment to building relationships, because you have to understand that you can't do it alone and that the more you involve others, the better off you will be.

Communication and Supports

Dr. Broome shared how she handles confrontation and conflict, specifically with the board members.

I have learned, Kisha, to contain sometimes my thoughts and my words, and I will acknowledge what they have said and what they have requested and just, to kind of get

away from the conversation or the conflict at that moment. I will, I'll say to them, thank you for that. I appreciate you sharing and I will take that under consideration. And that gives me the opportunity to back away because 30 years ago, that's probably not how I would've responded.

Although Dr. Broome is only a couple of years away from retirement, she spoke about the value of mentors and trusted colleagues.

It plays a huge role because, you know, as a superintendent, I don't think there is a superintendent in the country that knows everything. And so I rely very heavily on my colleagues when there's something that I'm struggling with. When there is advice that I need ... God, I don't know what I would do without my superintendent colleagues. We have a group of superintendents that I am a part of, and we have found that, you know, most people meet once a month. We meet twice a month because we learn so much from each other and we rely so much on each other.

Superintendent Broome also talked to me about a mentor and former superintendent. Dr. Jonathan Wright served as the interim superintendent at Brier Creek before she arrived. She relied on Dr. Wright as a thought partner and called him her 5:00 Sunday call.

He has been around. Jonathan Wright is my partner, and that's my 5:00 call on Sunday. And he just kind of lets me vent. He kind of, you know, asks me, oh, so what's going on in Brier Creek? Let's talk about Brier Creek. And he's just there for anything that I need. Yeah. And a true sounding board and very, very helpful.

She also noted that there was an influx of new superintendents and many come from other states. She took advantage of learning from others and connected with people with different experiences. Superintendent Broome told me that she was almost retirement age, so she

does not necessarily seek out mentors. “And so mentors, no, maybe not as much for me, but definitely people who may have some different experiences than I do and I could glean some information from them that I can use in my district.”

Conclusion

In the last moments of our conversation, Dr. Broome shared advice she would give to aspiring Black women superintendents.

Get any and every kind of experience you can from classroom experience to building administrator experience, central office experience, and do your homework around what the superintendency really is. Because some folks get into the superintendent’s role thinking, okay, I have arrived, I can sit back. And that’s not what this seat is about at all because ... it’s got to be about results. And if folks don’t think you’re bringing the results or getting the results, then they will get rid of you quickly ...

It was a delight to talk with Dr. Broome and hear about the lessons that she’s learned over the years. When I asked her about what was next for her, she shared that she was planning to move back to her home state, where she spent more than 20 years of her career. She considered different avenues, but she told me, “I don’t think I can walk away from education.” She mentioned that elementary school excited her, and “I’ve had the wild thought of being an elementary principal. I’ve never done that ... so. I think, you know, that could be something for me.”

Throughout her story, Dr. Broome is characterized by her courage to stand up for what is right even if she were standing alone. Black Girl Magic may take many forms and is unique to the individual Black woman, but Dr. Broome exudes Black Girl Magic in her tenacity to improve

the life of others especially for people who have unique and challenging circumstances. Her heart and courage for doing what is right exemplifies her Black Girl Magic.

CHAPTER VII: ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

In the United States, White males dominate educational leadership roles, specifically the superintendency (Alston, 2000; Angel et al., 2013; Brown, 2014; Horsford et al., 2021; Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021; Wiley et al., 2017). Historically, our knowledge related to educational leadership is primarily constructed from a White male perspective; however, Black women leaders have unique experiences that differ from the White and male experience. Black women superintendents are few, and despite the growing number of studies, their presence is still limited in the current literature on superintendents (Alston, 2000, 2005; Brown, 2014; Tillman & Cochran, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017).

The purpose of my study was to understand the lived experiences of African American women superintendents. Using portraiture as my methodology, I engaged with my participants on three different occasions. The first was an introductory meeting followed by two formal interviews with each superintendent. I used a semi-structured interview protocol to guide the data collection process. The participants and I scheduled 60 minutes for each session; however, the time varied based on the superintendents' responses. As I collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data, I carefully weaved the five core elements of portraiture (context, relationships, voice, emerging themes, and aesthetic whole) into each composition. In alignment with portraiture, my voice was subtle yet present throughout the portraits. Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought were two theoretical frameworks I used to structure my study, analyze the data, and generate key findings.

In the end, my study portrays the lived experiences of three superintendents who tell their stories in their own way and on their own terms. The core themes of Black Feminist Thought and

characteristics of Intersectionality center around Black women's self-definitions. Each participant contributed to composing their narrative and identifying the nuances of their experiences. Black women superintendents use their voices in this study to illuminate their lived experiences, and there is potential for the women to engage in intellectual work. Black women's intellectual work is not reserved for the elite or just academic scholars. Black women intellectuals cross all boundaries of social class and participate in developing the Black woman's standpoint (Collins, 2000).

The major sections of this chapter include analysis, discussion, and recommendations for practice and future research. In the following pages, I respond to my research question and sub-questions, with an emphasis on central themes that emerged during the development of the portraits. In order to enrich my analysis, I connect my study's findings to existing research, and then I discuss the implications of my research. I conclude by making recommendations for future research and practice and providing my final thoughts and reflections.

Analysis

My study was framed by a broad research question: *what are the lived experiences of African American women superintendents?* In addressing this question, I developed the portraits of Cinnamon Taylor, Olivia Robinson, and Carrie Broome in Chapters IV, V, and VI, respectively. These three African American women share similarities in their childhood experiences, their pathway to the superintendency, and their journey during the superintendency. However, the findings also reveal that their lived experiences and their interpretation of their experiences are different.

All three participants talked about growing up in a single-parent home and being primarily raised by their mothers. Cinnamon, Olivia, and Carrie discussed their mother's

influence on their lives or lessons learned. Cinnamon talked about how her mother's decision to make a major transition impacted her. She said, "I think that probably shaped just my belief systems around ... women's ability to do the hard things that we just often didn't see women doing in that arena." Dr. Robinson spoke about the life lessons from her mom. Her mom's examples empowered her to display strength, grit, and perseverance. Dr. Broome only mentioned her mother one time during the interview, yet she recalled her mother's circumstances and how it inspired her to want more in life. She identified her Aunt Wanda as an "other mother" who influenced her life. Importantly, all participants had other influential family members and teachers who served as "other mothers."

Dr. Broome's use of the term "other mother" connects explicitly with the work of Collins (2000), who defined other mothering as extended family or fictive kin who would assist in taking care of or supporting children that were not their biological children. Collins (2000) asserted that these women-centered networks were valued in the African American community and vital to their survival, and so did the participants in my study. Each of them also acknowledged that their success in life was partially thanks to the adults in their life who encouraged, supported, and cared for them. The superintendents identified people who helped them become successful. Family members like Dr. Taylor's mom, Dr. Robinson's grandparents, and Dr. Broome's Aunt Wanda made a difference in their lives.

In terms of preparation for the role, according to Revere (1987) and Jackson (1999), Black women superintendents are well-prepared for the position. Most leaders have attained the highest degree in the field, and most have had robust experience in the field (Jackson, 1999). Likewise, the Black women superintendents in my study had multiple degrees, including a doctorate, the highest degree in any field of study. Their experiences and preparedness helped to

build their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is present in all three superintendents and how they spoke about their leadership and their potential to effect change. They believe they can influence change in their organizations and make lives better for students.

Regarding professional experiences before the superintendency, Cinnamon, Olivia, and Carrie were classroom teachers and principals and served as district administrators; however, their pathways to the superintendency varied. Their different pathways to the superintendency led me to conclude that there is no traditional route to the superintendency. Dr. Taylor's first career was outside of education, and her first teaching role was as a high school Career and Technical Education (CTE) teacher. Dr. Robinson began as a middle school special education teacher, and Dr. Broome taught in an alternative setting, working with adults and pregnant teens. Cinnamon and Olivia gained experience at the elementary, middle, and high school levels before serving in a district position. All three superintendents worked at the school and district levels before the superintendency. During their paths to the superintendency, Cinnamon, Olivia, and Carrie had leadership experience in large school districts. Yet, their superintendent positions have been in small school districts, and more than 50% of their population are students of color. Cinnamon and Olivia expressed how working in a larger district shaped their lens when transitioning to smaller communities.

Carrie and Cinnamon mentioned educators, specifically supervisors in their lives, who saw their leadership potential. Cinnamon stated that her assistant principal kept "nagging her" to get her masters in school administration and talked about her ability to impact students. Carrie's assistant superintendent asked her to take on the summer principal position before she had administrative experience. Olivia shared gratitude for her grandfather. She explained that if it weren't for him, she would not have her doctorate in education.

Interestingly, the participants in my study did not aspire to the superintendency. Each of them was driven by their vision and wanted to positively impact schools and students. Cinnamon declared that she was “pretty jazzed” about every role she assumed, but it was never her dream to be a superintendent. “My dream was [to] make, do better, make situations for students and communities better. I think that was more of the impact that I wanted to have rather than a particular title.” Olivia resisted moving into the superintendency, even after 5 years as an assistant superintendent. She desired a change, but she was certain it was not the superintendency. Carrie states, “I never aspired to be more than a teacher. She decided to leave the classroom because she recognized that she could impact students’ lives in a different way. Although it was not their original plan, all three participants ascended through the ranks and were eventually appointed to the superintendent’s seat.

Sub-Question 1

I turn now to answering my research sub-questions. First, I asked, “*How do African American women superintendents describe how they lead?*” My study’s findings reveal that the Black women leaders in my study used various terms such as relational, cultural, and collaborative to describe their leadership. Regardless of what term they chose to use, in essence, they described their leadership as centered around people. Superintendent Robinson emphasized the focus on people when she stated, “I’m the type of person [that’s] going to do things with people, not to them, or for them.” These African American leaders believe that educators can do extraordinary things for students, and they see the greatness in others. These three Black women superintendents invest in others and build their staff’s capacity. When Dr. Broome recognized that many educators in her district did not understand student backgrounds, she created professional opportunities for teachers to build their cultural awareness. In addition, Dr.

Robinson challenged her district leadership and cabinet members to utilize their expertise and make tough decisions. Dr. Taylor supported professional growth by posing the right questions. Intentional questioning helped her staff to think about situations differently. In all three superintendent's narratives, their decisions to strengthen and build staff capacity are directly connected to their unwavering commitment to students.

The superintendents repeatedly used phrases that reflected their leadership style. Dr. Taylor's commitment to "do what is best for kids," Dr. Broome's passion to "level the playing field" for children, and Dr. Robinson's vow to "keep every single decision with students at the center" are messages that demonstrate their student-centered leadership. These findings from my study are similar to existing research, which supports the idea that Black women leaders desire to impact students and a greater community (Wiley et al., 2017). Jackson (1999) and Alston (2005) reported that African American women superintendents clearly articulate their commitment to positively influencing students. For Black women superintendents, students remain the center of their leadership and decision-making. Their love, passion, and commitment to students are demonstrated in many ways. Dr. Taylor used the phrase, "If it's best for students, I'm with you. If it's not what is best for students, I can't do it." She believes it is her responsibility to advocate for what students need and hold adults accountable for providing students with a high-quality education. She is transparent in her mission to "do right" by children. Dr. Robinson shares Dr. Taylor's passion for student wellness and elevating students' voices. Dr. Broome recognizes student diversity and provides students with opportunities and access to the necessary resources to succeed. It is their passion and commitment to students that drives their work.

To thrive in the superintendency, Black women leaders also engage in what Dr. Taylor calls "political work." Politics exists in every part of our educational system; therefore, African

American women must lead with a political mindset. The superintendency is a complex, socio-political position in which the leader must serve all community stakeholders. Brown (2014) conducted a study of eight African American superintendents who shared their narratives and highlighted the importance of managing the socio-politics of the position. Similarly, Dr. Taylor and Dr. Robinson demonstrate their political savviness in communicating with others, recognizing external influences, and positioning themselves in different spaces. Dr. Broome, however, expresses that navigating the political landscape is a struggle for her and that she is not a politician. Superintendents' experience working with key stakeholders who use their influence to drive priorities may conflict with students' needs. It takes bold and courageous leadership to stand up for what is right, even when you must stand alone.

The superintendents in this study serve as allies, advocates, and activists for students who have been historically marginalized. Superintendents who lead for social justice must understand power and influence regarding marginalized communities and student populations (DeMatthews et al., 2017). My study participants also shared examples of advocacy and social justice leadership before they were superintendents. Dr. Robinson realized in middle and high school that her choices to fight resulted from "standing up" for others. As a high school teacher, Dr. Broome remembers advocating for students of color who came to her for support when they felt mistreated. She also demonstrated advocacy when she proposed alternative pathways for students who were not successful in the traditional high school. Dr. Taylor recalls advocating for her niece as a beginning teacher when the school counselor discouraged her from attending a Historically Black College and University. These examples were precursors to the social justice leadership they exhibited in the superintendency. These examples represent what Horsford (2012) described as "bridge leadership," which she defined as "how the intersection of race and

gender as experienced by the Black women leader has resulted in her serving as a bridge for others, to others, and between others in oppressive and discriminatory contexts over time” (p. 17). Bridge leaders engage in grassroots efforts to dismantle oppressive structures and advance educational equity. Each superintendent describes their social justice work differently, but all three superintendents confront injustices and inequities in their personal and professional lives.

The African American women superintendents in my study lead by shaping the culture of their school and community. When Dr. Robinson arrived at Montane City Schools, she noticed an emphasis on adults and less on students. She created structures and systems that included student voice. Furthermore, she empowered students by giving them the space to speak about the topics that were relevant to them. The implementation of these practices influenced the district’s culture. Ironically, Superintendent Taylor discussed how the culture of one school she led as a principal impacted her leadership and how she cultivated a culture of high expectations in her current school district. She believes she is responsible for helping families hold schools accountable for providing their children the best. In addition, Dr. Broome’s determination to keep teaching and learning as a priority impacts the culture of her district. Her persistence forced others to have a conversation about academics and the quality of teaching and learning. All three superintendents impact the students, schools, and districts they serve. Sometimes, these subtle but significant changes in the district’s culture propel their organizations forward and promote continuous improvement.

Sub-Question 2

As my next research sub-question, I asked, “*How do African American women superintendents speak about the challenges they encounter?*” My study’s findings reveal that Black women may have similar challenges in the superintendency, yet the magnitude of these

challenges varies. I also find that context matters, and the superintendent's context influences the challenges they encounter.

All three superintendents spoke about the negative interactions with stakeholders who question their authority or credibility, purposely attack them with false accusations, or treat them disrespectfully. This is similar to a study by Jean-Marie et al. (2009), who found that the authority of Black women educational leaders is routinely challenged, and their credibility is questioned. African American women superintendents must also confront negative stereotypes (Barnes, 2017; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Stanley, 2009). Dr. Broome talked about male board members who attempted to exert their power and dominance and make demands when pushing an agenda different than the district's vision. Dr. Broome also stated, "It gets really tough when you have folks who are fighting you unnecessarily because they have hidden agendas about things." She provides an example of how a key stakeholder has intentionally attempted to manipulate a situation, falsify information, and personally attack her. She said, "I find myself in a situation where it feels like I am, like there is an attempt to manipulate. There is always an inaccurate story that goes out ..." Dr. Robinson told me how others have questioned her credibility and about a time when she was repeatedly addressed as Ms. Robinson and not Dr. Robinson. She explained how she was also attacked with false accusations but recognized that these statements were intended as intentional distractions. She summarized her experiences with the following Malcolm X quote: "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman." Dr. Taylor shared that the top three positions in her district were Black women at one time. She had others bring this to her attention because Black women in executive roles conflict with society's norms and expectations. Dr. Taylor stated there are school districts with White men in the top leadership positions, but she believes that it is never questioned or even noticed

with White men in these roles. From her perspective, White men are viewed as deserving of executive roles, but not Black women. The ongoing attacks and questioning of their decision-making represent the barriers that negatively impact the superintendent's reputation and hinder their ability to lead.

Working with the local board of education is also another challenge that emerged in my research. The relationship between the school board and the superintendent is complex. Although school board members determine the superintendent's employment, they leverage the superintendent's knowledge and expertise to guide their decision-making (Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021). Dr. Robinson explained that the dichotomous relationship with the board presents a challenge because the superintendent is accountable to the board of education; however, her job is to "equip them with information so that they in their spheres of influence can help move the work as well." Dr. Broome's response concurs with Dr. Robinson's views. She stated that working with the board of education is challenging because they sometimes want to proceed with ideas that conflict with policy and laws. She has to educate board members and ensure they make sound and ethical decisions aligned with educational policy. Dr. Broome discussed the difficulty of working with board members who are not educators in a small, rural community. She grapples with keeping the mission on teaching and learning while responding to the demands of board members who do not understand education.

On the other hand, Dr. Robinson explained that she is grateful to have educators serving on her local board, but the challenge is to keep them from "getting into the weeds." Dr. Taylor did not identify any specific barriers with the board of education; however, she talked about how certain groups may not respond to her ideas in the same manner as they did to her White male predecessor. She did not specify if the "certain groups" included the board of education

members. All in all, two of the three participants specified how working with the school board is both complex and challenging.

In general, superintendents face many challenges. Issues such as the global pandemic, civil unrest, critical race theory debates, and rights for LGBTQ students are a few topics that have challenged superintendents. However, Dr. Robinson's statements capture the sentiments of the superintendents in my study. "Superintendents across the country are in difficult, difficult times ... and it only is exacerbated for superintendents of color, particularly those of us who are females."

Sub-Question 3

As my next research sub-question, I asked: *what attributes and supports do African American women superintendents perceive as contributing to their success?* I learned from each of the study's superintendents that their personal attributes contribute to their success. The research literature on African American women superintendents suggest that successful African American superintendents demonstrate strength, perseverance, and resiliency as they encounter daily challenges and obstacles unique to Black women (Revere, 1987; Tillman & Cochran, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017). The superintendents from my study share some of the same qualities; however, their personal attributes are unique to them and are a part of their Black Girl Magic. The findings of this study reveal that each of the superintendents exudes confidence in their words and actions. They speak with clarity about who they are, what they believe, and how they lead. Superintendents Taylor, Robinson, and Broome are characterized by their strength, courage, and resiliency. For example, from an early age, Dr. Taylor believed she was smart and capable of accomplishing great things. The participants in this study also demonstrate their ability to handle difficult situations without straying from their vision and goals. These Black

women leaders continue to work towards their vision regardless of the obstacles they face. They exhibit the courage to stand up for what they believe in and stand up for what is right for students.

Other personal attributes are exemplified in each of the participants. Dr. Taylor's love for her students, staff, and community is one personal attribute that contributes to her success. For Superintendent Taylor, her love for people is natural and is grounded in care, honesty, and transparency. Dr. Taylor and Dr. Robinson both expressed the importance of their faith and belief that God is the number one reason for their success. Dr. Taylor directly relates her spirituality and accountability to God to her purpose and commitment "to do what is right." This is similar to how several scholars reported that Black women superintendents attribute their success to their faith and spirituality (Alston, 2005; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Black women's spirituality helps to sustain them in difficult situations. In addition, Dr. Robinson's experiences and ongoing criticisms have helped her to develop a "thick skin." It has strengthened her so that she can endure difficult situations. These experiences and her advocacy for students like herself, contribute to her success as a superintendent. For Dr. Broome, she stated that her commitment to relationships and resiliency are among the top two reasons that she is successful. She exhibits resiliency when facing a multitude of challenges, and relationships are critical because she understands that "you can't do it alone and that the more you involve others, the better off you will be."

The superintendents in this study are also strategic in how they communicate and respond to negative situations. For Dr. Broome, she has learned to keep her composure, acknowledge what others may say, and then give herself the time and space to process the situation. Dr. Taylor approaches rude comments with strategy. She states, "If you don't have the political acumen to

navigate a rude comment from someone, you're not going to make it there." She takes the high road and attempts to keep the conversation positive. Dr. Robinson is politically savvy and considers her audience when communicating. She spends time with her superintendent's cabinet in strategizing. The superintendents understand their responses to negativity can prevent situations from escalating into issues that shifts their focus away from their leadership priorities.

All superintendents in this study have a support system and surround themselves with people who support them through their challenges. Their support system is comprised of people who not only care about not their professional success, but also people who care about them personally. In terms of other supports that the participants identified, they considered mentoring to be important. The study's findings indicate that mentors and other influential people contribute to the success of all three superintendents. In general, Dr. Taylor and Dr. Broome talked about mentors serving as coaches and thought partners, respectively. Mentoring can provide support to all educators. Hill and Ragland (as cited in Tillman & Cochran, 2000) stated that to mentor is to guide, train, and support others who lack knowledge and experience. In addition, the scholars suggest that mentors provide assistance with learning the nuances of the organization. Dr. Taylor did not have a mentor in her first year as a superintendent, but she believes that "the support of a mentor would have made the difference." The superintendent's mentors give sound advice about specific situations or talk through problems of practice. Their mentors are retired superintendents, former supervisors, and other colleagues in the field. Two of the three superintendents in the study identified their mentors as Black men and White women. Ongoing support and mentoring are essential for helping develop and support Black women superintendents. Although there are limitations, mentoring is a critical element that contributes to the success of African American women superintendents.

Sub-Question 4

In my final research sub-question, I asked: *How do African American women superintendents perceive their identities (race and gender) have influenced their lived experiences as superintendents?* All superintendents in this study identified as Black women. They acknowledged that Black women superintendents have a unique experience that differs from Whites and males in the role. Similar to the findings of my study, the existing literature indicates that neither the Black nor feminist standpoint alone captures the lived experiences of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Accordingly, I used Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought to construct meaning from the superintendent's narratives and how their identities influence their lived experiences.

The findings of this study suggest that society's views and perceptions of Black women impact their lived experiences. For instance, Superintendent Taylor's white female colleague asked why she was different from other Black women (i.e., loud, emotional). Her colleague's comments affirmed that she believed the negative stereotypes to be the norm for Black women, and Dr. Taylor represented the exception. If this is the perception of Black women, Black superintendents must always be cognizant of how they are perceived so they do not perpetuate the same stereotypes and images used to oppress them. In analyzing this encounter, Dr. Taylor reflected on the implications for school board members and other influential leaders who may hold these same views of Black women. Like Dr. Taylor, Dr. Robinson also recognized that when they see us, they do not see our greatness, which is what I call our Black Girl Magic. I use the pronoun "they" in the previous sentence to represent society and the white male-dominated culture in the United States.

Black Feminist Thought examines how Black women have been portrayed throughout history and how Black women are not seen positively (Collins, 2000). Barbara Christian, a Black feminist critic (as cited in Collins, 2000), argued that Black women have been defined as our society's "other." The "other," in a binary way of thinking, is inferior to what is considered mainstream, and the dominant group constructs their narrative. Collins (2000) noted, "As the Others, U.S. Blacks are assigned all of the negative characteristics opposite and inferior to those reserved for Whites" (p. 89). Superintendent Taylor elevated the notion that social media portrays Black women negatively. She also stated, "I do think that there are people who have in their mind what they consider to be the typical Black female. And if you look at the typical Black female in their mind, what they're thinking [is] not necessarily positive attributes for a person who's supposed to be leading an organization." I believe this interaction fuels the belief that Black women are not equipped to serve as a superintendent. There is a perception that African American females do not have the attributes that society values in an executive leader. Dr. Taylor stated, "When most people think about leadership. Most people, men and women, they think about men. That's the default. I think most people, Black and White, when they think about leadership, they think about whiteness. Right? Black women are neither."

Based on the lived experiences of my study's participants, these Black women leaders experience different forms of racial and gender discrimination. Dr. Robinson brings attention to the ongoing attacks and false accusations that she has endured as a Black woman in the superintendency. "There are distractions, attempted distractions, the attempted attacks, just because I happen to be a Black female leader." Furthermore, Superintendent Taylor provides various examples of discrimination from childhood to the workplace. When she was one of two Black students who attended Central Lake, she recalled how one classroom teacher attempted to

exclude her. She described an experience prior to her teaching career where she went for an interview, and they were surprised that she was Black. There was another experience where she went in for an interview, and the person stated that they did not know she was Black and that the owner of the company didn't interview Black people. In addition, Dr. Taylor also provided examples of microaggressions from the staff she supervises. Staff members have made subtle comments and questioned her advocacy for students who are historically marginalized. In summary, Dr. Taylor expressed that "It's nearly impossible as a Black female to not experience microaggressions."

Dr. Broome and Dr. Taylor reveal specific gender issues that have impacted them. Superintendent Broome navigates the challenges of Black men board members who believe they can use their dominance for control. Historically, women have assumed subservient roles and have often been portrayed as weak or accommodating, yet men are perceived as strong and dominant (Collins, 2000). Superintendent Broome stated, "It has been difficult trying to deal with those very dominant personalities, especially when I can be very headstrong and we often butt heads." Superintendent Taylor also discussed that there is a negative impact on the female superintendent's relationship and the need to have a supportive spouse. Because of the traditional roles of women in the context of family, the demands of the superintendency can be detrimental to a relationship. The demands of the position are intense and require a supportive partner who understands the requirements of the superintendency.

The findings from my study suggest that discrimination and microaggressions may occur more aggressively and frequently for African American women superintendents because of the intersections of race and gender. Crenshaw (1989) explained that Black women are oppressed in

ways that are similar to women and the Black community; however, the impact of the double discrimination impacts Black women disproportionately more than one marginalizing condition.

African American women experience other challenges in leadership and are forced to navigate double standards. If African American women communicate in a direct, assertive manner, they are perceived as being confrontational. It is acceptable and admired when men are assertive; however, there is a double standard for women (Chin et al., 2011). Consistent with the existing research, the African American women superintendents in my study also experienced double standards. These Black women encountered limitations in how they behaved, responded, and communicated. Dr. Taylor provided an example of the double standards that Black women leaders encounter. Dr. Taylor stated, “I think I could make the same exact mistake as my White male colleague. Would it be perceived the same? And I’d say no. Not by anyone, not even other Black females.” She provides a typical scenario that exposes the different perceptions of White males and Black females.

If I yelled in a staff meeting because I’m passionate about something and I’m yelling because we’re not doing what we need to be doing for these kids ... The adjectives that would describe me are not the adjectives that would describe a white male who would do the same thing about Black children in a school district. He would be perceived as being passionate and caring and loving. And look how concerned he is about what’s happening with our children. And they don’t look like him. If I did that exact same thing, I would be considered unhinged. I would be considered out of control. People were questioning, Am I okay?

Navigating and resisting double standards intensifies the complexity of leading as a Black women superintendent. My study reveals that Black women superintendents temper their

approach. Dr. Taylor feels that she intentionally chose an organization where she can lead authentically; however, she acknowledges that she cannot communicate like a White male or female. She and her team are strategic when they communicate messages to their stakeholders. “I have to be strategic about how I get the same messaging across, but in a different way; whether I say it differently [or] whether I connect with someone who is not a person of color and get them to say it.” Superintendent Taylor notes that she has to appoint another colleague who is not a person of color to present an idea because there are groups of people who are more willing to accept it. Their experiences demonstrate various ways Black women navigate double standards in the workplace without hindering their leadership agenda.

The findings in my research of three African American women superintendents reveal an underlying pressure to be perfect because the unintended consequences of one mistake can be detrimental to their careers. Similarly, in Goines-Harris’s (2020) mixed methods study, Black female leaders discussed the pressures of having to work twice as hard as their white and male counterparts to prove themselves. Dr. Taylor witnessed firsthand the behaviors of the former superintendent in her district. She recognized that if she behaved similarly, she would not have lasted more than a year. Dr. Taylor recounted specific events that have occurred with Black female colleagues and how African American women are disciplined differently than White leaders or Black men. She stated, “One wrong or inappropriate comment can lead quickly to dismissal.” As did participants in the Goines-Harris (2020) study, Dr. Taylor experienced how there are harsher consequences for Black women superintendents compared to Whites and males. The threat of having one mistake jeopardize your career inevitably leads to more stress on “being perfect.” Dr. Broome considered herself blessed because her board recently extended her

contract, but she also acknowledged that superintendent contracts are different and that the board of education can call for your termination at any time and for any reason.

Notably, when asked to describe their identity, each of the participants identified both their race and gender. Only one of the participants mentioned class as a part of their identity. In regards to how these three African American superintendents perceive their identities have collectively influenced their lived experiences as superintendents, they perceive the impact of race and gender differently. Some experiences are collectively impacted by the intersections of gender and race; however, some experiences place more emphasis on one dimension of their identity.

When Dr. Taylor and Dr. Robinson responded to the question, they first identified their race and then gender. Dr. Broome identified gender first and then race. When I analyzed the data in its totality, the superintendents who identified their race first talked more about the impact of race. Based on her experience, Dr. Robinson stated that she believes everything is about race. She recognizes there are research theories that align with her school of thought, but she admits that there are people who would disagree, some who do not look like her, and others who do share her identity. The superintendent who stated her gender first primarily talked about gender issues and did not perceive that issues of race hindered her mobility and ability to lead. This observation is significant in drawing conclusions about how each woman views herself and provides a glimpse into how she views the world around her.

Implications

The three portraits of Cinnamon Taylor, Olivia Robinson, and Carrie Broome represent highly successful African American women serving as public school superintendents. The findings build upon existing research by elevating the voices of three African American

superintendents through the construction of their portraits. The portraits showcase the superintendent's Black Girl Magic and celebrate how these women show up in educational spaces and flourish in the face of adversity. I used Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought as theoretical frameworks to better understand Black women's experiences in the superintendency. Using portraiture provides a lens to understand how these three African American women superintendents construct their reality and describe how they see themselves as the chief executive leader.

The following paragraphs highlight three implications that emerged from the study and how they each contribute to expanding the current scholarship on Black women superintendents.

Leading with Authenticity

The results of this study imply that when Black women superintendents are in spaces where they can be authentic, they are better positioned to lead and advance their leadership agenda. My findings demonstrate how Black women grapple with fitting in and belonging in spaces where they do not feel valued, respected, and cared for. When Black women do not fit in, they often feel like they are living in two different worlds. There is pressure to conform to society's norms, which reflect a White male-dominated world. This pressure leads to an internal struggle to find a balance between conformity and authenticity. Brown (2014) explained that African American women superintendents functioning in a white-male-dominated society are forced to wear "masks" (p. 574), and Black women cannot reveal their true selves. The masks represent conformity and ways that Black women's identity and voice are suppressed.

My research adds to the literature by demonstrating how superintendents intentionally find spaces where they do not have to "wear their mask." For instance, Dr. Robinson made an intentional decision to move to a school district where she can lead authentically. She encourages

other Black women superintendents to research and find an organization that is aligned with their vision, mission, and values. I was also inspired by Dr. Robinson's efforts to cultivate a culture to help Black leaders find their voice and to lead in authentic ways.

Context Matters

My study expands the existing research by exploring how the superintendent's context contributes to the uniqueness and complexity of Black women's experiences in the superintendency. The results of this study indicate that context matters. Black women superintendents' lived experiences are shaped by their context. Geographically, the context was different among the three superintendents. The findings reveal notable differences in the communities and local school boards they serve. For example, Dr. Robinson leads in a school district where the board of education is primarily educators, and there is an intentional focus on social justice. The school system is well-resourced and nationally recognized.

On the contrary, the other two superintendents led in school districts situated in high-poverty communities with fewer resources and schools that are designated low-performing. The expectations of the district's communities vary based on contextual factors such as belief systems, values, and traditions. Although superintendents work to shape the culture of their district when needed, they also honor their community's traditions. In Dr. Broome's context, key stakeholders prioritized athletics over academics, which conflicted with her vision as a superintendent. This example demonstrates how localized beliefs and traditions can alter the superintendent's lived experiences. This study deepens our understanding of Black women superintendents' experiences by investigating how their context creates a unique yet complex experience.

Critical Importance of Black Women Superintendent Mentors

Finally, my research findings emphasize the critical importance of mentoring for and by Black women superintendents. Research literature indicates that superintendents acknowledge the lack of networking and mentorship as a challenge that complicates the work of Black women leaders (Goines-Harris, 2020). In tandem with the existing research, the superintendents in my study acknowledged the limited number of Black women serving in the superintendent role (Angel et al., 2013), which inevitably limits the number of Black women superintendents available to serve as mentors. Black women superintendents in this study identified primarily Black men and White women as their mentors and also attributed their mentors as a factor that impacted their success. My research adds to the existing literature by distinguishing the identities of Black women's mentors and asserts that Black men and White women mentors, even with the best intentions, are limited in their ability to coach, mentor, and understand the dynamics of Black female leadership in the superintendency. Dr. Robinson specifically highlighted that her mentors, Black men and white women, struggled to understand her lived experience "and it takes too much time to explain and give context for people to really get it." She also stated that, to her knowledge, there is no organization created by and for Black women superintendents. The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for Black women superintendents to have access to a mentor who understands the intersections of being Black and female in the superintendency.

Recommendations

In this section, I use the findings from my research to help inform recommendations for various audiences. The results provide recommendations for Black women who aspire to the superintendency, educational leaders and institutions, and recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Black Women Who Aspire to Be Superintendents

The results of my research study to understand the lived experiences of African American women superintendents can influence aspiring Black female superintendents and other leaders. Black women in the field of education can benefit from accessing collegial networks, organizations, and mentors that can support their accession to and during the superintendency. Aspiring Black female superintendents can seek out other Black female superintendents. The number of Black female superintendents is limited, but leaders can connect informally or formally with existing Black women leaders. Networking with other Black female leaders at conferences and professional events can be beneficial. Black women should build their own circle for support and advancement of their agenda. Networking helps to build a powerful coalition of Black women united to advance their cause. Joining organizations such as the Black Women Educational Leaders organization will provide mentorship or access to other Black women superintendents. Modern technology allows for leaders to access Black women superintendents and eliminates distance as a barrier.

Dr. Robinson provided salient advice to aspiring Black women superintendents that is noteworthy. Black women educational leaders must seek positions that align with their beliefs and values. When there is alignment between the head and the heart, Black women can lead in authentic ways. Every opportunity is not a great opportunity, and Black women must be selective in their search for a superintendent vacancy. It is important to understand the culture that exists in the organization and the greater community. Engage in research before applying and accepting the superintendent position. Aspiring Black women superintendents can learn from people who live in the community and review local board minutes and district documents to learn more about

the school system. Aspiring superintendents should find spaces where they can lead authentically, and that is truly a best fit.

Recommendations for Educational Leaders and Organizations

Local, regional, and state leaders must acknowledge the obstacles that African American women face and use their social and political resources to remove barriers and create a space to elevate their voices. The research suggests that local and state educational leaders create opportunities include Black women in the decision-making process so that their perspective is heard and considered.

Black women superintendents engage in social justice work to eliminate the marginalization of people of color and other marginalizing conditions. Social justice action is critical to providing a quality education for every student; therefore, social justice action should exist in statewide strategic plans. African American women need allies and a coalition of leaders who can assist with social justice action. Black women often carry the weight of advocating for our most vulnerable communities while overcoming the obstacles of being Black and female. Therefore, allies and advocates can join forces with Black women superintendents to advance the social justice agenda.

State and national leaders should design initiatives to diversify the workforce, including executive leadership. Increasing the number of African American women superintendents requires intentional moves to recruit and retain Black women and other women leaders of color. Departments of public instruction can partner with outside educational agencies and non-profit organizations to develop aspiring superintendent programs to engage Black women serving in school and district leadership roles. These programs can support Black women in attaining the

superintendent role and providing a safe haven for Black women leaders who often navigate unchartered territory.

School board associations should create a strategic plan to assist local school board members in attaining knowledge and diverse perspectives on educational leadership. This professional learning opportunity for school boards should include ongoing dialogue about racism and other social justice concepts. Training can also include how to recognize and avoid bias in the superintendent search. These new perspectives can support schools boards in making sound decisions as it relates to students of color and superintendent selections.

Universities and other institutions of higher education can better support aspiring Black women superintendents by redesigning educational leadership program to address the needs of women of color. Programs must include opportunities to learn and shadow African American women who serve in the superintendency.

Recommendations for Research

There is a growing number of scholars who have contributed to the research literature on Black women superintendents (Alston, 2000, 2005; Brown, 2014; Tillman & Cochran, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017). As more scholars research Black women superintendents, I suggest that we explore the impact of their context. My participants are leading in districts in the Southeastern United States; therefore, their geographic location is a contextual factor that may influence their experiences. I recommend that more scholarship is generated about African American women serving in different geographical areas and how their context influences their leadership.

Another opportunity for research is investigating the impact of mentors who are Black women executives. In this study, I found that mentoring occurs organically and contributed to my participant's success. However, none of the superintendents had a Black female mentor. I

believe more research is needed on the development and impact of formal superintendent mentoring programs that are specifically facilitated by Black women superintendents in the field.

Final Thoughts

My vision for education has clearly evolved throughout my career, leading me into educational leadership, and igniting my passion to understand Black women's leadership in the superintendency. Before this research study, I did not have access to Black women superintendents or any African American women in senior leadership positions. I am grateful to the three Black female superintendents who graciously took the time to bring me into their lives and to show me a glimpse of their life from childhood to the superintendency. We began as strangers, but the construction of their stories created a sisterhood that I deeply cherish.

As an African American educational leader, I identified with the superintendent's narratives. I used my voice to connect with their stories, but purposeful in using their words and repetitive refrains to describe their experiences. As I listened to the participants describe their lived experiences, there were times I laughed, and other times I could feel the heaviness they felt during their toughest times. As the three superintendents shared their lived experiences, I listened intently for a story and designed their portraits to capture the essence of who they were.

My research study with three African American women superintendents has been a powerful, transformative experience for me as a Black woman and an aspiring superintendent. These women have taught me that I am not alone. Because there are only a few of us in high-profile positions, it feels as if no one understands our journey and that we have to navigate how to exist in an educational space where we are not always wanted. I have learned that there is a sisterhood that we can tap into that allows us the freedom to share our stories, which makes this journey feel less daunting. The sisterhood provides a space for healing from the trauma that we

experience, and the bonds help to restore our joy. There are many takeaways for me as an aspiring superintendent. Superintendents Taylor, Robinson, and Broome have modeled how to remain steadfast in your mission in the midst of the storms. Inevitably, we all experience storms and external forces that distract us. When I think about my experiences and the Black women superintendents in my study, I visualize the scene in the movie Matrix, where Neo, the main character played by Keanu Reeves, is attacked. In this scene, Neo skillfully dodged bullets that were intended to destroy him. The bullets symbolize the ongoing criticism and attacks that Black women superintendents endure. My study participants have taught me how to “dodge the bullets” and not allow external forces to distract me from my purpose. These lessons will continue to shape my leadership as a principal and future superintendent.

Similar to my participants, I did not begin my career with aspirations to become a superintendent. I remember my father asking me as a beginning teacher if I wanted to be a superintendent. Although I only had a limited understanding of the superintendent’s role, I resisted any thoughts of serving students in any capacity other than teaching. Teaching empowered me to change the lives of individual students and brought me a special kind of joy that I had not experienced. However, like the Black women superintendents in my study, I have leaders and mentors who see my potential as a superintendent and influenced me to take the next steps in leadership. From my participants, I have learned that the superintendency is challenging, but there is potential to greatly influence the lives of all students, specifically the students who look like me. If I had any reservations about pursuing the superintendency, my research study has only confirmed my interest and desire to serve in this role. The lessons learned from the three superintendents and how they use their Black Girl Magic has better equipped me in my pursuit of the superintendency.

Cinnamon Taylor, Olivia Robinson, and Carrie Broome have individually and collectively inspired me by exhibiting their Black Girl Magic. African American female leaders achieve success despite the unnecessary and intentional strategy to tear us down. The study's participants make many claims about the harsh and negative interactions they experience. Those in power want to keep Black women at the bottom of the social ladder because they are threatened by our Black Girl Magic. Black Girl Magic is how we use our strengths—confidence, courage, self-efficacy, intellect, and resiliency—to not only overcome obstacles but to thrive. These Black women superintendents defy the odds by attaining a position that is intended for and dominated by White males. They have each shared countless stories of how they dismantle systems of oppression and how they navigate an environment where they are seen as a villain. Instead of succumbing to brutal attacks and inhumane treatment, these Black women still rise. In the poem, *Still I Rise*, Maya Angelou writes, “You may trod me in the very dirt, But still, like dust, I’ll rise.” These lines represent the lived experiences of African American women superintendents and how their Black Girl Magic will continue to exist.

I thought my research would help prepare me for this role, but what I have gained from my research has been more than I anticipated and more than I could have hoped for. Sometimes, I struggle to articulate my lived experiences, but exploring their lives has helped me understand myself. I see myself in these women. Therefore, my story is intertwined with theirs, yet it is independent and unique to me.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE 1

Opening Questions

1. Tell me your story.
 - a. Describe your childhood experiences and any events that have impacted your life.
 - b. Who are the key people who have influenced your life?
 - c. What have been the most defining moments of your life?
 - d. What is the source of your inspiration? What is your why?
2. What are you most passionate about in education?
 - a. What makes you most excited?
 - b. What frustrates you the most?
3. Why did you decide to become a superintendent?
4. Describe your career pathway to the superintendency. What were your roles and experiences in education before you became a superintendent?
5. Describe the personal and professional experiences that prepared you for the superintendency.
6. How would you describe yourself as a superintendent? From your perspective, how would others describe you?

How do African American women superintendents describe how they lead?

1. Describe your role and responsibilities as a superintendent.
2. From your perspective, what knowledge and skills do you need to succeed as a superintendent?
3. What are your priorities as a superintendent, and how did you determine them?
4. Describe your leadership style.

5. Describe the culture of your school community.
6. How has your leadership shaped the culture of your community? How has your culture shaped your leadership?
7. Can you share any moments or events during your superintendency that have exemplified your leadership?
8. What does social justice leadership mean to you, and how does it inform your leadership?
9. In what ways do you promote or see social justice? How do you use cultural, social, and/or political resources to promote social justice?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE 2

What attributes and supports do African American women superintendents perceive as contributing to their success?

1. How do you define success in your role as superintendent?
2. What are the factors that contribute to your success?
3. What has been your greatest achievement(s) as superintendent? Who or what do you attribute your success to?
4. How has mentoring played a role in preparation for and during the superintendency?
5. If you had a magic wand, what kind of support would you wish to have as an African American woman superintendent?

How do African American women superintendents speak about the challenges they encounter?

1. Have you encountered challenges personally or professionally that have hindered your work as a superintendent?
 - a. Are these challenges unique to your current position/location?
 - b. How are these challenges different in this context?
2. As you reflect on your leadership, how have you overcome or attempted to overcome the challenges you face?

How do African American women superintendents perceive their identities (race, gender, and class) have collectively influenced their lived experiences as superintendents?

1. How would you describe your identity (i.e., race, class, gender)?

2. How does your identity compare to the identities of others in your district community (i.e., students, building and district staff, local board of education)? How do you think this impacts your ability to lead?
3. As a superintendent, tell me about an event or an experience where you have you have been oppressed based on your race, gender, class, or other marginalizing condition. How did you respond? Have you had any similar experiences in your personal life?
4. Can you tell me about any experiences where your identity as an African American woman has given you an advantage? Can you recall any experiences where your identity has been a barrier?
5. How does your identity impact your ability to lead?

Closing Questions

1. There are few African American women serving as public school superintendents. Why do you think there are not more Black women in this role?
2. What are your career aspirations beyond the superintendency?
3. Is there any other information that you would like to share that I have not asked