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Since the late 1980s, there has been research on the topic of female superintendents that has addressed white women and minority women alike; however, research indicates that there are marked differences regarding the issue of access as it pertains to this level of professional leadership for African American women. Due to the exclusion of their voices in readily accessible literature, and despite a growing number of dissertations on similar topics, the black female educational executive's voice has been all but overlooked. An African American female's role as a school district leader is greatly informed by race and gender. Therefore, these roles must be critically studied through the lenses of race and gender to be useful for African American women. This study explores the career experiences of 13 African American women in district level leadership positions, including seven non-superintendent district leaders and six superintendents.

This qualitative study, using the lens of Black Feminist Thought, analyzes the similarities and differences of career experiences for African American female district executives, along with the effects of professional and personal support systems, on their respective experiences. The road to district level leadership and particularly the superintendency is a different road for African American women, and in order to increase access for this underrepresented group, their experiences must be shared. This study was written by an African American woman, featuring African American women, and for African American women as the target audience. Practitioners, gatekeepers, and school

district development institutions can use findings and implications of this study in order to increase awareness and access for those often overlooked in school district leadership, particularly the superintendency.

AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS:

THEIR CAREER EXPERIENCES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

by

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Approved by

Carl Lashley
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I dedicate this to my late maternal grandparents, Grover Cleveland Edwards and Henrietta Mason Edwards. I am because you were. Thank you for establishing a beautiful family full of traditions, expectations of achievement and an education, and prayer. You were always and still remain the rock of our family.

I also dedicate this to the village that made this possible and made me who I am. "We owe it to our ancestors and to the sacrifices they made, to continue to achieve higher goals, while maintaining our identity." (Unknown Author)

APPROVAL PAGE

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following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North
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Two biblical reflections have guided me through my career and through this journey: *Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths* (Proverbs 3:5-6, KJV), and *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"* (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Since childhood we have been taught to believe we can become anything we wish. In order to further this belief, children are taught to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before them. This traditional perspective, commonly applied to children across racial and ethnic identifications, is perfectly characterized by the popular movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, in which the heroine is led to the land of promise by simply following the pre-established path, widely known as the yellow brick road.

As an African American child growing up in a family of educators, I noticed the proverbial yellow brick road as it was laid out before me. This included college, a career in teaching, and even a principalship. My family made it a point to raise me with an awareness of my racial identity that included anticipation of Black History Month each February, a time during which African Americans celebrate all of the achievements of the African American heroes and heroines of the past who overcame adversity and accomplished great feats.

In this, as well as in other ways, I was taught that despite the social and political barriers faced by so many before me, African Americans have accomplished great things; that we, as individuals and as a people, can follow in their footsteps and make a difference in the world. Consequently, as an African American child who sought to walk

down the yellow brick road of accomplishment as it was understood in my family and culture, I believed that I could accomplish any goals that I might choose for myself as I grew into adulthood. In particular, because I personally knew someone who had achieved her own professional goals and accomplishments, I believed that I too could follow in her footsteps and achieve similar results.

Later on, as a professional educator, once I began to consider my future professional aspirations-beyond the principalship, I noticed that the yellow brick road stopped at just that point for me. I could not see a clearly outlined road leading toward higher professional achievement beyond the school building, and I came to realize that not many people who looked like me, an African American woman, moved beyond the position of principal into district level leadership and definitely not the superintendency.

Statement of the Study Problem

Since the late 1980s, there has been research on the topic of female superintendents that has addressed white women and minority women alike; however, the research indicates that there are marked differences regarding the issue of access as it pertains to this level of professional leadership for minority women. Moreover, there is a missing component within the research on female educational executives in terms of documenting their lived experiences in general and more specifically concerning the reflections of women of color on the supports they have utilized that may have propelled them to top school district positions. Due to the exclusion of their voices in readily accessible literature, and despite a growing number of dissertations on similar topics, the black female educational executive's voice has been all but overlooked.

On this basis, I am suggesting that the path, or yellow brick road, for the African American female who aspires to be a district leader is different from that of any other group and thus needs to be studied. In my research process, I have found that some studies directly address the experiences of African American female superintendents in a general sense, while some other studies specifically address the experiences of aspiring superintendents. Nonetheless, I am proposing that more work in this area needs to be done. Therefore, focusing on the importance of support systems, I aim to show how one's role as a school district leader is greatly informed by race and gender; and therefore, these roles must be critically studied through the lenses of race and gender in order to be successful and useful. Reconnecting to the problem of excluded voices, I further aim to shed light on the fact that while the impact of support systems on the career experiences of African American women in district level leadership is entirely significant and essential to their achievement, the stories of their mentoring experiences remain untold from the viewpoints of African American women.

Motivation for Undertaking this Study

The lack of a clearly defined path leading toward the attainment of higher positions of professional leadership in education for African American women motivates my desire to study school district leadership and to determine what characteristics are shared among those women who have been successful in reaching and retaining the position of superintendent as well as other district-level executive positions. Motivated in this way, I intend to analyze the similarities and differences of career experiences for African American female district executives, along with the effects of varying support

systems, on their respective experiences using an interview process. As such, I include two groups of participants in this study: (a) school district level executive leaders who are African American women, and (b) school district superintendents who are African American women. I used qualitative, open-ended interview questions to gather the data from the participants.

The American School District Superintendency

In order to adequately understand the experiences of African American women in school district executive leadership positions, the history of the superintendency—including the topics of women in the superintendency, black women in education, and black women in the superintendency—must first be understood. In this section, I discuss these topics as they provide background and context for my study.

The scarcity of female superintendents has been perpetuated by a variety of societal and personal issues. As such, there is no one specific problem and consequently no one solution. Due to a combination of complex, intersecting factors, the American superintendency is believed to be the "most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" (Glass, 1992, p. 8). I find it difficult to comprehend the fact that any field or profession is still dominated by a singularly identifiable group in the year 2015. A field that is populated almost exclusively by one gender group and supervised by another gender is an even bigger problem and points to inequities that will not be remedied until they are first named and identified.

Since 1837, when the position of the superintendent was first created (Glass & Franceschini, 2007), most superintendencies have been held by white men (Blount,

1998). Currently, approximately 76% of America's professional educational work force is female (Snyder, 2014), while only 24% of school superintendents are female (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Similarly, in 2000, minorities only filled 5% of superintendencies (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000) with 5% of those superintendencies belonging to minority women (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Of the existing literature and research regarding the superintendency, which spans approximately 95 years (Glass & Franceschini, 2007), most of the studies and findings fail to mention the gender, racial, or ethnic identities of the participants studied, thus implicating the exclusion or neglect of non-majority voices and their experiences.

While the American Association of School Administrators is a noted voice on the state of the superintendents and offers consistent research via their ten year published studies, the voices of women and minorities is only recently becoming a topic of interest and inclusion. A vast amount of research and professional development through texts has been introduced through the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), which has published numerous readings and studies regarding the superintendency and, more recently, women in relation to the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Women in the Superintendency

The issue of women in the superintendency has become a topic of interest to many researchers and currently the literature is readily available to substantiate the belief that this is a needed area of reform (Alston, 2005; Black, 1998; Brunner, 2008; DeAngelis & O'Connor, 2012; Gewertz, 2006; Grogan, 1999; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Tallerico, 2000). However, much debate continues regarding the validity of some of the

frequently cited literature produced by earlier researchers, primarily male researchers, in comparison to more recent research findings. One of the most cited pieces of research is the *2000 AASA report on the American Superintendency*, the findings of which have since been openly questioned. The 2000 report overwhelmingly neglects minority and gender differences by surveying, but not separating, responses based on race and/or gender, thus presenting the responses of white males as the majority without disaggregation. Glass et al. (2000) introduced data in the AASA 2000 report suggesting that women and men were acquiring degrees at the same rates but that women were not seeking the superintendency credential. Further analysis by Brunner and Kim (2010) pointed out that Glass never presented data or figures for the above statement, implying that Glass's conclusions appear to be unfounded. On the other hand, Brunner and Kim (2010) shared that, of women they surveyed in a study, 93.5% of those interested in becoming a superintendent already had the certification.

The 2000 AASA report, focusing on males, also shared the fact that most superintendents had five years or less actual teaching experience (Glass et al., 2000). This is misleading considering the fact that women traditionally teach ten years more than men before moving into administration. This difference in professional experiences leading up to administration is key when recruiters are advising, and school boards are discouraged from hiring superintendents who teach for longer periods of time and thus exclude more females who traditionally remain in the classroom longer. This difference has no statistical grounding on effectiveness of superintendents in comparison to their years of classroom experience, and yet the preference for candidates with fewer years of

teaching experience is practiced. This leads one to question the reasoning behind this stance. I propose that instructional leadership is a primary responsibility for most, if not all, superintendents, and years of classroom experience traditionally strengthen instructional capabilities, thus making females more prepared for the position.

Considering the data addressed in this section, I suggest that new information regarding the face of the superintendent must be explored and shared; further, any new data must incorporate the views of superintendents who do not fit the typical white male mold. A more inclusive, as well as expansive, sharing of characteristics regarding the face of the superintendency in the realm of contemporary education would likely present a very different and more favorable view of current female superintendents as well as a more supportive culture for women who are qualified and aspire to seek the position of superintendent. The black women leading urban school districts with arguably the most severe needs show that black women have proven themselves to be qualified to lead school districts and resources and support systems should be made available so that more opportunities can be actualized.

Black Women in Education

Since enslavement, black women have been educating children. By the early 1900s, approximately two-thirds of all black teachers (male and female) were black women (Collier-Thomas, 1982). Even when educating black children was illegal, black women have persevered to serve their communities and stepped up to educate the masses.

While 24% of all superintendents now are women (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011), the statistic is misleading because it fails to disaggregate the

data by the racial and ethnic identity of the women. However, Brunner and Peyton-Caire's (2000) study provides such data, revealing that of the female superintendents included in the study, 91.6% were White, 5.1% were Black, 1.3% were Hispanic, 0.7% were Native American, and 0.7% were categorized as other (as cited in Alston, 2005). Both sets of data point to the issue of inequity as experienced by all women in terms of their limited access to the superintendency, but it is unquestionably severe for black women as well as other minority women. The gap in the research is undoubtedly in relation to black women, as they are regularly silenced within the larger groups of minorities, blacks, and women whenever researchers fail to define them as a group combining gender and race. As stated by Collins (2009), the "pattern of suppression is that of omission" (p. 8). In order to better understand the experiences of black female district executives and superintendents and their support systems, the rich tradition of black women in education, both as teachers and in positions of educational leadership, must first be explored and shared.

Black Women in the Superintendency

The 1920s brought about a time when black women, immersed in educating others and themselves, began to open their own schools and serve as teachers and administrators. The Anna T. Jeanes Foundation was started to provide exceptional educational opportunities for African Americans, a group that was not privy to a quality education at the time. The group who provided instructional assistance to African American teachers was named after the benefactor of the funding (Provenzo, 2008).

By the 1930s, Jeanes supervisors (named after the original financial benefactor), who were primarily black women, began to serve in leadership capacities in schools within the rural South in order to improve educational conditions (Provenzo, 2008). These black female educators/supervisors essentially served in the capacity of superintendents. As articulated by Alston (2005), "Like modern-day superintendents, the Jeanes supervisor served as negotiator, crisis handler, resource allocation specialist, disseminator of information, staff developer, and personnel specialist" (p. 679). This marked the beginning of widespread black female educational leadership noted in history.

Jeanes supervisors continued to work in this capacity until the *Brown v. Board of Education* landmark suit that mandated desegregation of all public schools. The negative impact of desegregation for African American education workers included thousands of blacks losing their educator jobs, as black students were bused to white majority schools. This, too, marked the end of Jeanes supervisors. Nonetheless, in the spirit of Jeanes supervisors, black female educational leaders (particularly superintendents) still exist and flourish despite the odds and obstacles they continue to face.

The stance of a black female superintendent is often different when compared to that of non-minority superintendents, especially the dominant group of white men. Self-efficacy heavily influenced women and people of color in regards to combating negative stereotypes (Reed, 2012). Others may sometimes misconstrue this self-efficacy as arrogance, but it is rather a sense of pride in their ability to "do the work." In 2006, black women led 13 of the nation's 66 largest school districts (Gewertz, 2006). This data indicates that black women are leading some of the largest school districts in the country

and that they are often hired to struggling districts with high minority populations (Kowalski et al., 2011). If this is the case, today's black female educators should be provided increased access to the superintendency. As a black female administrator, the search for mentors and role models who have obtained the superintendency and share similar attributes is intensified by the "double whammy" (Alston, 2005) of discrimination that face black women in educational leadership.

The amalgamation of gender and race can create behaviors and shared experiences that may lead to stereotypes, such as the commonly used "angry black woman." The stereotype of the "angry black woman" has become a regular label that can sometimes oppress black women and cause them to be pressured to behave in a more "feminine" style so that they are not intimidating. The strength that is sometimes warped into the "angry black woman" is explained by Scott (1991) in *The Habit of Surviving* with a story about the experience of learning about being a strong black woman after some white girls at school pushed a 13-year-old girl's head in the toilet. After running home to her mother, in tears, the young black girl did not receive the pity that she anticipated.

> My mother taught me two powerful and enduring lessons that day. She taught me that I would have to fight back against racial and sexual injustice. She taught me that my feelings did not matter, that no matter how hurt I was, how ashamed, or how surprised I was, I had to fight back because if I did not, then I would always be somebody's victim. She also taught me a lesson I did not want to learn: She taught me exactly when my private pain had to become a public event that must be dealt with in a public manner. . . . Standing up for myself was what I had to do because it was the way Black women had to be. (pp. 3–4, as cited in Dillard, 1995, p. 550)

This mindset can be detrimental to the careers of black women when their career

placements are concerned, if those backgrounds and causalities are not understood.

Many black female superintendents are "radical" in that they typically serve poor, high-

minority populations (Reed, 2012), which may require a different leadership and

authority style. This in itself is a display of strength. Black women encounter the

double-edged sword of external critique in regards to not being "feminine enough" while

at the same time being considered intimidating if they exert their competence.

Definitions of Key Terminology

The focus of this study is to analyze the impact of support systems on the

experiences and careers of African American women who are school district executives

and school district superintendents. For the sake of this study, the following terms are

defined or specified:

- Woman—used interchangeably with female.

- Black—American-born individuals of African descent, regularly referred to as

  African Americans.

- Support Systems—any resource that is leveraged on the behalf of the personal

  and professional development of an individual's success. It can include

  networking, mentoring, family structural accommodations, peer groups,

  special interest groups, etc.

- Networking—the practice of establishing largely informal relationships with

  individuals, both within and outside of one's organization, that increase social

capital and that may significantly increase access to greater career visibility and opportunities (Witmer, 2006).

- Mentor—an experienced individual who offers personal and professional support for another's career or personal advancement (Witmer, 2006).

- Mentee—the individual/protégé benefitting from the professional experiences and expertise offered by a mentor.

- District—a school district (a designated region) comprised of public school settings; not to include private institutions or charter entities.

- Superintendency—the chief education officer/CEO position in public school districts.

Mentoring

Mentoring is widely regarded as a key component of a person's career success and trajectory, but mentoring can be greatly supplemented and supplanted by other support systems. The importance of mentoring is due to the outcomes of the mentoring relationship for the mentor and mentee. Mentoring is especially important for professionals who have been traditionally disenfranchised and thus are in need of more support and guidance to overcome barriers and challenges in their professional environments. Most books written about career success mention mentoring and explain its importance to one's career, but it is often unclear how these mentoring opportunities should be obtained and implemented for mentors or mentees. Even though mentoring has become a common and formally structured practice in many successful, for-profit organizations and businesses, that trend has not transferred holistically to educational

management. To clarify, while most states require that teachers receive a mentor, with some districts even paying the mentor for additional mentoring responsibilities, the more politically charged positions within educational management (school and district levels) often leave mentoring up to chance or casual networking events. The lack of professionally structured and implemented mentoring practices aimed at the higher levels of educational leadership stands as a great detriment to minorities, women in general, and definitely to minority women. Without the formal structures and available information regarding executive-level mentoring opportunities and practices, these groups are not likely to not receive the benefits of mentoring relationships.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to bring greater awareness to the educational community of the impact of support systems on the career success and satisfaction for black women. I desire to give voice to that impact and make the stories of women interviewed accessible and real for black women and the educational community as a whole so that K-12 administrators may better understand the intersectionality of race and gender within black female school district executives and how it impacts their career experiences. This study will explore the current trends in support systems (including mentoring) within corporations and school systems and is intended to serve as a crosswalk for black female educators aspiring to become school district leaders, who are searching for career support for achieving their goals. In turn, this study is also intended to resonate with and provide impetus to those educational leaders seeking to offer support. Central to my study purpose, I place the lived experiences of African American

women at the forefront, highlighting their voices through personal interviews, so that patterns may arise and potentially lead to a greater awareness of the value of mentoring relationships and other support systems for creating positive change and increasing black female educators' access to professional career advancement opportunities in the executive levels of education.

The significance of this study is its potential to contribute relevant, real-world information about the professional experiences of contemporary African American female school district executives. However, the impact of support systems other than mentoring on such an underrepresented group within the superintendency has yet to be studied and shared from the viewpoint of African American women. The results of this study may be utilized to develop mentoring programs and related curriculum, to develop institutes and conferences with a focus on African American female school district leaders, and to inform the hiring practices of school boards, search firms, and other gatekeepers.

Research Questions

My primary research questions are:

1. What are the driving forces behind black female professionals pursuing or not pursuing the district level leadership?

2. What experiences with support systems lead or led to the district level leadership for black women?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory

Critical Feminist Theory is deeply steeped in the previously established Critical Theory paradigm. Critical Theory focuses on "detecting and unmasking of beliefs and practices that limit human freedom, justice, and democracy" (Usher, 1996, p. 21). By critiquing and revealing the ideologies and structures that have created barriers for African American women, the individual is better armed and positioned to overcome and potentially remove those barriers. Further, Critical Feminist Theory researchers believe "gender oppression is not experienced or structured in isolation from other oppressions" (Maguire, 1996, p. 108), and thus it is necessary to focus on other intersecting forms of oppression at the same time. As such, consideration and analysis of race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexual preference, and other identities must also be included in the research in order to understand women's intersectionality with gender and other identities (Glesne, 2011).

Critical Race Theory includes an underlying focus on activism in line with other critical theories. It offers the belief that, with colorblindness and meritocracy, people of color are often systemically oppressed and silenced. In order to counteract these practices, race is placed at the forefront of the study. Critical Race Theory touches on some of the experiences of the Black woman but within the same context of the Black man. This theory is a useful start to understanding the Black people, but it lacks adequate critique for the black woman in order that she not be overshadowed by the plight of the black man.

Critical Feminist and Critical Race Theories only address a portion of the Black female struggle because of the unique social constructs of race and gender, which can only be adequately studied using a different theory and lens that is an amalgamation of both, which is Black Feminist Theory (or Thought). The choice between identifying as black or female is a product of the patriarchal strategy of divide-and-conquer and is thus counterproductive to the lived duality of the black woman (Dill, 1983). Relative to the contexts of my study and my concerns regarding the historical silencing of black female educators, I am proposing that black female superintendents have not had ready opportunities to share their experiences as superintendents. Therefore, in my study process, I aim to address their voices through "counterstories" and in "counterspaces" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 23), attempting to capture the intersectionality of gender, race, and class that requires a theoretical framework specific to the experiences of the participants and the purpose of this study. That theoretical framework is Black Feminist Theory (also known as Black Feminist Thought).

Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought

Black women are in a class all to themselves. This understanding is needed in order to understand the plight of the black woman educator, particularly in the superintendency. Black women experience feminism differently from white women because they do not share the same benefits. Black women often experience discrimination similar to black men, and sometimes similar to white women, but they are also subject to discrimination that is akin only to black women (Cole, 2009). Thus, black women may find themselves attempting to fight off negative stereotypes of both groups if

they are not given a voice that is unique to black women. DuBois (1903) depicted this

struggle in *Souls of Black Folk:*

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. xiii)

Others have shaped the identity of Black Women in order to control the assertive Black

woman and Black Feminist Thought is designed to undo that work (Howard-Hamilton,

2003). According to Cheryl Gilkes (1981),

> Black women's assertiveness in resisting the multifaceted oppression they experience has been a consistent threat to the status quo. As punishment, Black women have been assaulted with a variety of externally-defined negative images designed to control assertive Black female behavior . . . Many of the attributes extant in Black female stereotypes are actually distorted renderings of those aspects of Black female behavior seen as most threatening to white patriarchy (as cited in Collins, 1986, p. 17)

The research on black female superintendents includes studies using a variety of

lenses or theories such as Feminist Theory, Critical Feminist Theory, and Theory of

Resilience citations. In keeping with the focus of empowering black female school

district executives and the individuals who aspire to support them, the voices of mutually

supporting black women will be utilized and incorporated using an epistemology that

serves that same purpose, Black Feminist Epistemology or Black Feminist Thought.

The lack of research and literature on black female superintendents predicated on

its complicated intersectionality lends itself to a dynamic epistemology that speaks

exclusively to the standpoint of Black women, Black Feminist Thought. Men (and black men) and women alike have silenced Black women, due to their subordinate status within other theories. Black women utilize self-definition in Black Feminist Thought to clarify the standpoints of black women for their own uplifting and empowerment (Collins, 1986). According to Collins (1986), it is the duty of the Black Woman intellectual to showcase these standpoints. The key themes of Black Feminist Thought are:

1. Concrete experience as a criterion of meaning

2. Use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims

3. Ethic of caring

4. Ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 1989, pp. 758–770)

"Black feminist thought contains observations and interpretations about Afro-American womanhood that describe and explain different expressions of common themes" (Collins, 1986, p. 16). Rather than adding to existing theories by inserting previously excluded variables, Black feminists aim to develop new theoretical interpretations of the interaction itself. Black feminist thought is a critical social theory that:

> Encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a group. . . . What makes critical social theory "critical" is its commitment to justice, for one's own group and for other groups. . . . Black feminist thought encompasses general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment. (Collins, 2009, p. 35)

Methodology

This qualitative interview study included 13 African American female school district executives from various parts of the country. Participants were selected based on

the personnel directory of approved school districts, and some were referrals from other participants or colleagues. Criteria for participation in the study were based on holding a doctoral degree and fulfilling the role of a school district executive. Seven of the participants were non-superintendent executives, and six were school district superintendents. Due to the small pool of participants and the need for anonymity, geographical location was not a consideration in participant selection.

Summary Statement

Women staff the American education system overwhelmingly, and yet a white male most often fills the highest leadership position, that of the school district superintendent. Research on the superintendency often presents data in terms of gender *or* race. There is a scarce amount of research on the superintendency in regards to gender *and* race, particularly as the intersections of gender and race impact African American women. Nor does the research examine first-hand the challenges that African American women face in their quest for the superintendency or how experiences with appropriate supports can address those challenges. Mentoring and other professional support systems is a major determinant of career success and particularly in positions that are not readily available to oppressed groups. However, in-depth studies have not been shared that examine the experiences and effects of professional support systems on African American women in school district executive positions or the superintendency or other support systems that may contribute to success. This study will attempt to share study participants' experiences with professional and personal support systems and the effects of those support systems on the careers of African American female school executives.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter I provided an introduction to the study, addressing background information along with the purpose and significance of the study. Chapter II includes an extensive literature review of school district leadership and the theoretical framework to be used in this study. Chapter III provides an in-depth look at the methodological choices and decisions made throughout this study. Chapter IV and V addresses the data, discussing and analyzing the responses of the participants with non-superintendent district leaders in chapter IV and superintendents in chapter V. Chapter VI concludes the study with a final discussion and summary of the findings, including ongoing limitations of the study and implications for further research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

To continue on the route of preparation for the superintendency, the individual

aspirant often participates in higher education programs that focus on educational

leadership. While such programs typically enroll a high number of women, "only a

fraction of superintendency positions have been filled by women compared to the greater

number of women in central office positions" (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 21).

Consequently, 76% of all educators are female (Snyder, 2014), thus making up the

majority of the proposed applicant pool and yet women only make up approximately 24%

of superintendents (Kowalski et al., 2011).

Traditionally the superintendency has been characterized as a highly political and

extremely stressful position and based on this traditional perspective, has been said to not

be of much interest to most women (Glass et al., 2000). While the view of the position

may partly explain the minimal presence of women in the superintendency, it fails to

include a variety of other factors including bias. However, the data from recent studies

conducted on women and the superintendency speak to the contrary. Such studies

indicate that conventional assumptions concerning low aspirations among women

regarding the position of superintendent cannot be the only or primary reason why only

24% of superintendents are women (Kowalski et al., 2011). According to Kim and Brunner (2009), almost 40% of women in central office aspire to the superintendency.

Extending this discussion of women in general and the superintendency to the situation of *black* women and the superintendency, it is significant to point out that while research tends to acknowledge the disparity between the largely female professional teaching force and the minority presence of females in the superintendency, the lack of black females in the superintendency is even more disturbing. While 24% of all superintendents are women (Kowalski et al., 2011), the statistic is misleading because it fails to disaggregate the data by the racial and ethnic identity of the women. Of the 24% (Kowalski et al., 2011), 91.6% were White, 5.1% were Black, 1.3% were Hispanic, 0.7% were Native American, and 0.7% were categorized as other (Alston, 2005). Although the grave injustice and inequity to women is the same, it is doubly severe for black women.

Rationale for Study

This chapter presents the rationale and existing research on the experiences of African American female school district leaders by examining the superintendency and the support systems that increase the successful attainment of district leadership and career satisfaction. Due to the focus on African American female district leaders, commonly studied supports focused on widely impactful mentoring. While mentoring is considered the path to leadership positions, African American females often struggle and share that mentoring is difficult to obtain.

The recognition of mentoring as a key strategy for success is not negated but additional research will be shared that it is not the only support system that increases

professional success. The following review of literature will share information about the superintendency, a position that greatly impacts the positions that are considered preparation responsibilities or roles that lead to the superintendency. I will also share information on the historical and prevailing barriers to district level leadership, professional and personal support systems to overcome the barriers, and the lens through which this research study was conducted.

Pipeline to the Superintendency: Hiring Practices

The superintendency application process is often outsourced to what are commonly referred to as executive search companies. The use of search firms has increased over time and continues to the present day. Originally however the selection process for the superintendent position traditionally rested on the shoulders of a small group of university personnel. Over time, a growing number of districts have begun using executive search firms to recruit and hire for superintendency openings. "The firms point to the experience of their consultants— typically, former administrators—and their ability to work their professional networks to find the best person for the job" (Hann, 2008, p. 41). These search firms often became the gatekeepers for local school district superintendencies. Gatekeeping, as defined by Lewin (1947) and later Shoemaker (1991), means viewing superintendent selection as a flow process involving the passage of applicants through a variety of "channels" (as cited in Tallerico, 2000, p. 19), most of which are composed of multiple subdivisions or "sections" (Shoemaker, 1991, as cited in Tallerico, 2000, p. 19).

To summarize the applicability of these hiring practices to the present situation, access to the superintendency is influenced by:

> (a) gatekeeping decisions based on power-holders' personal criteria,
> (b) the routine practices that characterize headhunting for superintendents,
> (c) norms embedded in the educational administration profession, and
> (d) the dominant ideologies and socio-cultural values of American society.
> (Shoemaker, 1991, as cited in Tallerico, 2000, p. 21)

Based on the premises stated above, gatekeepers hold the keys to the superintendency. As such, they have the power to, consciously or unconsciously, prevent some applicants from gaining entry.

While search firms are believed to be impartial and objective third party search companies in search of the right "fit" for the community in which the superintendent will serve, this "fit" may further the status quo of a stratified society or community. Combined with the personal biases that any person brings to his/her professional decision-making practices, a particular selection process may lead to discrimination through normed search criteria that favors white males over minorities and women. Tallerico (2000) expounded on the attitudes and practices that lead to limited access to the superintendency in favor of males:

> Maienza (1986) draws heavily on Kanter's (1977) theoretical perspectives to illustrate the organizational and institutional factors that affect access to the superintendency. These include structures of sponsorship and opportunity (including, e.g., opportunities for visibility within the educational profession), power structures (e.g., networks and alliances of influentials), and the relative representation of males and females in educational leadership (which defines in-group and out-group members). At the broadest ideological and socio-cultural level of analysis, Maienza identifies a number of variables unique to women and

their administrative careers, including sex-role conflicts, interrupted participation in the labor market, family responsibilities, and gender bias. (p. 22)

Gatekeepers limit their recommendations to a specified set of criteria and professional experiences (Tallerico, 2000). The career path favored for the superintendency is obtaining line positions over staff positions. Line positions are positions that directly lead to the superintendency, such as principalships and central office advisory positions that require some certification and are more visible and carry more accountability. In contrast, staff positions are administrative positions that traditionally offer more stability and tenure but not a vast amount of interface time with the policy makers. These positions often carry the title of Director, Coordinator, etc. They are considered equivalent positions in terms of responsibility and status and thus reflect horizontal moves regarding career growth or movement.

In terms of the principal position as a direct line position to the superintendency, there is a hierarchical structure in place that assigns greater or lesser values to the principalship based on the school level. For example, secondary principalships are valued more than elementary principalships due to the increased fiscal responsibility and community visibility of secondary principals. This preference is detrimental to minorities and women considering the dominance of white males in secondary principalships. Finally, the most qualified applicants—based on current selection criteria—are respectively former superintendents, assistant superintendents, and secondary principals—all positions dominated by white men (Tallerico, 2000). This is *de facto*

discrimination due to the embedded advantage given to white men at the expense of minorities and women.

Due to the cultural embeddings of the "white male" preferred applicant profile, gatekeepers may not introduce other potentially viable candidates to the selection process. Candidates who do not match the preferred white male profile, but yet whose professional experiences and expertise might be considered as valid, alternative routes to the superintendency are often excluded from the pipeline and not considered as viable candidates. Moreover, Richl and Byrd (1997) showed that gatekeepers often referred to their level of personal comfort with particular applicants (as cited in Tallerico, 2000). For example, a search firm may cite their selective belief that the applicant would be able to easily relate to the community or the board members when offering recommendations for superintendents. Considering that most gatekeepers and school boards are comprised of white males, this practice is "more likely to disadvantage people of color and females than White male applicants" (Tallerico, 2000, p. 36) because they may not share certain preferred attributes associated with white males.

In order to counteract this inequity in recruiting, research must be introduced that will show that the superintendency is a position that is dynamic, like the society and education community that it serves, and must remain fluid in its representation so that it can utilize the attributes and talents of qualified individuals who may not fit the traditional role. On this point, such an exclusionary selection process brings into question whether the publicized shortage of qualified superintendents is a myth--based on

the gendered and raced applicant pool of majority white males--or a reality signifying the

lack of proper preparation for the superintendency by educators.

The exclusion of many qualified women from the superintendent selection

process significantly contributes to the publicized superintendent shortage. If more

females were considered for the superintendency, the shortage would likely be much less,

if not actually eliminated. It is difficult to believe that women are competent enough to

fulfill all of the administrative duties leading up to the superintendency and yet are not

considered competent enough to lead the entire district. Are women satisfied with central

office positions, or are they frustrated with hitting the glass ceiling at that level?

Barriers Faced by Women Seeking the Superintendency

Barriers to Women's Professional Aspirations

Sexism is one part of the explanation for the shortage of female superintendents

(Brunner, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Specifically, sexism

accounts for many of the internal and external barriers that affect women's motivation to

seek the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007), very often correlating directly to

women's concerns with age. In the 2003 AASA study of women in the superintendency,

women cited age as a deterrent from seeking the superintendency, because by the time

family obligations and child-rearing responsibilities were no longer in conflict with the

assumption of additional professional responsibilities, they felt that they were nearing the

end of their careers (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Further decreasing the likelihood that a woman will seek the superintendency is

the impact that age has on pursuing the superintendency. The 2007 AASA study of

female superintendents and central office personnel revealed that chances of becoming a

superintendent decrease with age, thereby implicating the fact that female aspirants to

administrative positions, particularly central office administrative positions, should

pursue executive advancement at an early age (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Consequently

and ironically, this study shed an optimistic view of the superintendency for women in

the near future. Especially significant to the issue of women's ages, data revealed that

21.5% of aspiring female superintendents were under the age of 51, while 30.9% of male

superintendents were under the age of 51 (Kowalski et al., 2011). This contrast in

numbers leads to the possible increased number of female superintendents in the future

and the possibility of them reaching the superintendency earlier than in previous years.

Barriers to Women's Obtaining the Superintendency

"Discrimination occurs if women receive fewer leadership opportunities than men

even with *equivalent qualifications*" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 67). Gooden (2009) notes,

"White men still hold the majority of all leadership positions in fields ranging from sports

to business. This translates into white men having the highest income averages and

holding the highest positions of influence and power" (p. 237).

Research has shown that women superintendents have more preparatory degrees

than men, have more years of classroom teaching experience, and participate in more

professional development activities than men (Kowalski et al., 2011). Yet, women still

only make up approximately 24% of school superintendents, thus signifying that barriers

to women's professional advancement continue to negatively impact their access to the

superintendency (Kowalski et al., 2011). Three terms are used to describe the barriers to

women reaching the top levels of leadership in their field, especially male-dominated fields. These terms—glass ceiling, labyrinth, and glass elevator—are used to describe the trajectory, over time, of women's career advancement in educational leadership.

The glass ceiling, first introduced in 1986, "implied an absolute barrier—a solid roadblock that prevents access to high-level positions" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 4) for women in the workplace. The metaphor of the labyrinth was an acknowledgement of change from the insurmountable glass ceiling to a difficult and obstacle-filled, yet possible path to access top executive positions for women. "The Labyrinth contains numerous barriers, some subtle and others quite obvious . . ." (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 6). In male-dominated career fields, women often experience arduous and slow promotions while, on the other hand, "token men advance quickly in female dominated careers" (p. 74). The fast promotion of men in these non-traditional (for them), female fields was termed the *glass elevator*. As an example, the elementary school setting, a traditionally female-dominated environment would represent the glass elevator for men choosing to teach there (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Overall, and taking into account the meanings and significance of these terms as they continue to speak to the ongoing challenges faced by women seeking career advancement in the field of education, progress continues to be slow and uneven. Women are still promoted at a slower rate than men, and the rate slows even more as women move up the career ladder (Waller & Lublin, 2015, p. R1). I submit that such barriers to women's obtaining the superintendency point to the issue of gender as a primary reason behind such uneven and unjust hiring practices in the educational ranks.

The barriers for women reaching the superintendency are not isolated to women, but family responsibilities, connected to the question of relocation, can add another layer of obstacles that are more complicated for women. Considering the singular position of superintendent, in order to increase the probability of being hired as a superintendent, many aspiring superintendents must be willing to relocate or if they are not willing to relocate, accept the possibility of never reaching that pinnacle position of superintendent. The "move to get ahead" system is especially difficult for aspiring female superintendents because most are married, and their husbands may be partnered supporters or primary supporters (financially) of their families, thus preventing the husband from moving and making the mobility of the female more of a hardship and sometimes unfeasible. Most superintendents, on average, hold three superintendencies during their careers. This means that many families of career superintendents could move approximately four times (Witmer, 2006). For women in particular, this choice between career advancement and maintaining the family's current home base, can be a major deterrent from moving for a superintendency and is a double standard for women (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Gender also affects the expectations that others have for aspiring and active female superintendents in terms of their professional stance and communication practices in the workplace. For example, women educational leaders must balance the need to be communal, while also being direct and assertive. Such expectations are even greater and more critically significant for the aspiring or active superintendent who is a black woman (Eagly & Carli, 2007). According to Eagly and Carli (2007), "women's assertiveness

many pose even more obstructions in the labyrinth for black women than white women, to the extent that black women are more assertive" (p. 103). Black women encounter the double edged sword in regards to not being feminine enough and also being considered intimidating if they exert their competence. This is an issue that is only applicable to the black female.

Finally, the women who actually achieve the superintendency typically represent certain shared characteristics. They tend to be older than women in higher education, are likely the firstborn or only child in their original families, are higher achievers, have higher IQs and higher achievement records, are more likely to hold a doctorate than men, are married to college graduates (many of whom hold advanced degrees), and are more likely to be risk takers in their personal and professional lives. Since such characteristics demonstrate that female administrators "are highly skilled, highly motivated, and persistent, the quality of the women administrators is excellent" (Witmer, 2006, pp. 10–11).

In 2006, 13 of the 66 largest school districts in the nation were led by African American women. This shows that black women are hired to lead some of the largest school districts in the country and often are hired to "turnaround" struggling districts with high minority populations; and yet, they still struggle with gaining access to the superintendency pool (Gewertz, 2006). If this is the picture of the pool of superintendent applicants who are female, qualifications are not the reason that they make up only a fraction of sitting superintendents. Instead, it points to a system of discrimination and embedded obstacles that make access to the superintendency a challenge for all women

and, especially, for black women. Ultimately, along with the more obvious barriers of age, gender, and race, I am proposing that inadequate mentoring frameworks and practices, along with other inadequate support systems, constitute a major problem for women's advancement into executive, educational leadership roles today.

Mentoring and Networking

Throughout the literature, the importance of mentoring is highly prevalent, leading to the conclusion that mentoring is one of the most influential factors and strategies for successfully advancing to the position of superintendent (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Brunner, 2008; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Tallerico, 2000; DeAngelis & O'Connor, 2012). The literature fails to mention, in detail or in the words of those affected, the impact of additional supports such as networking that also increase success. I focus on networking as another form of professional support that can supplement and even supplant mentoring, depending on the availability of mentors.

Networking as a Support

It is often through networking practices that mentor-mentee relationships are established. Effective mentors encourage mentees to network and both are vital to career development. Networking is defined as "a support system and a means of connection to others" (Witmer, 2006, p. 243) that allows a person to access multiple relationships through these connections and, thus, receive information not openly available. Simply stated, "networking is knowing and connecting with those who can help you" (Witmer, 2006, p. 244). Networking is of mutual benefit to all parties involved, developing trust and allowing for information sharing between the parties. According to Witmer (2006),

author of *Moving Up!*, networking will take place whether one chooses to participate or not. However, choosing not to participate will place one at a disadvantage because of the loss of access to important information. Independence or isolation, in contrast or comparison to networking, is not recommended because of its detriment to career progression due to a lack of informational exchange and professional advantages that are gained through networking.

There are two types of networking within established educational institutions: formal and informal. Formal networking is closely tied to the official organizational structure and hierarchy. It involves the chain of command and the procedures that are followed by those involved (Witmer, 2006). The informal network of an organization underscores the formal networking structure.

> [Informal networking] is composed of various characters and informal roles played by those characters . . . and is the organization's primary means of communication. This informal information network provides the *real* reasons behind the official ones for decisions made and actions taken by the organization. (Witmer, 2006, p. 244)

Some view networking as self-serving, but it has become an acceptable way to conduct business, according to Witmer (2006), and should be considered an "extended circle of friends" (p. 246) because it is necessary and mutually beneficial, making business easier if a person knows the people with whom he or she is professionally linked in a "setting other than business" (p. 246).

Gendered networking. Women and men network in different ways that seem to be effective for their respective purposes. Consequently, "women cannot and should not

replicate the networking system of men" (Witmer, 2006, p. 250). Men's networking is often "unconscious, informal, and private" (Witmer, 2006, p. 248). Further, as a result of the activities often experienced by men in their childhood years (such as playing on sports teams), "[t]hey are taught to collaborate and work with each other. They learn not to hold grudges. They learn to share. Along with reading, writing, and arithmetic, they absorb the fact that they *need each other* [to advance]" (Kleiman, 1981, p. 3). According to Witmer, woman have not internalized the lesson learned by men that they too need each other. Women have modified the traditional male way of networking and have made it more convenient for their schedules and preferences to include: online groups, book clubs, dinner groups (can also include breakfast and/or lunch groups), hobby groups, pamper groups (manicure or spa sessions scheduled at a common time and location), and/or becoming involved in the cadre for women within their state association for school administrators (Witmer, 2006).

Despite the vast, affirming benefits of networking with other women, women must also network with men, especially since men still dominate the primary and most powerful networks in most organizations (Witmer, 2006; Eagly and Carli, 2007). Networking is predicated on relationship building, and due to the overwhelming presence of men in power, networking is inherently easier for men (Eagly and Carli, 2007). This simply means that women must put in more deliberate effort to network and possibly modify their usual networking strategies and techniques. In "mixed-gender" environments, women and men can begin conversations about neutral topics such as weather, current events, or movies. To assist in the development of the conversation,

both parties should be well-versed in educational issues and other issues that affect education or the government. Humor is suggested as a good icebreaker and displays confidence (Witmer, 2006, p. 253).

Raced networking. Networking for women of color raises additional challenges for them because race and gender, together, constitute a twofold barrier for building social capital, positioning women of color further apart from the majority, white male power players. On this point, Eagly and Carli (2007) noted the importance of networking with other women of color, stating, "[W]hile attempting to join influential, mainly white male networks, they also [should] network with others who share their race and gender" (p. 146). This allows them to receive guidance and support despite racial and gender barriers that exist.

Networking is important to one's professional comfort and progression and is worthy of the time and energy that it may require. Networking can be maximized if planned and intentionally set up. Building the connections and networks with those who can support one's career is an important step towards finding a mentor who can take a more active role in one's professional development.

Mentoring as a Support

Mentoring is "defined as guidance, training, support, and one-on-one counseling that can be both formal and informal" (Witmer, 2006, p. 258). The term mentor was first introduced in Homer's poem, *The Odyssey*, in which "Odysseus entrusted the education of his son Telemachus to his trusted friend and counselor, Mentor" (Witmer, 2006, p. 258). Over the years, mentoring has come to signify the relationship between a younger

protégé and an older, more experienced and professionally established mentor. Due to the traditional, white male power structures of institutional (political, economic, and social) organizations, the typical mentor was an older, white male. There are countless benefits to having a mentor. Witmer (2006) outlined the following benefits and opportunities that mentors can provide:

> counsel and advise, possibly open doors to new opportunities, and provide connections and introductions. They instruct those they are mentoring in the ways of the profession, its formal processes, and informal networking. They smooth the way, introducing their protégés to others who can help them; they advise as to career moves; and they offer personal advice, if needed, on such things as appearance, speech, and any other characteristic that may be used to evaluate the protégés' qualifications. Mentors can save time and provide shortcuts for those they are mentoring, advantages that might otherwise come only after a more circuitous path. Mentoring is considered a very powerful training tool and the one that is *most likely to guarantee mobility within an organization* (emphasis added). (p. 259)

Raced mentoring. Despite the benefits of utilizing the expertise of a mentor, there are barriers that make securing a mentor especially difficult for women and, particularly, for women of color. Due to the organization and power structures in the majority of organizations that perpetuate male dominance, there are more men available as mentors than women. In turn, since people prefer to mentor someone like themselves, women are less likely to be mentored than men. Coupled with the long history of women beginning their administrative careers later than men, the pool of mentors is smaller for women because most mentors are older than their protégés (Witmer, 2006). Finally, the issue of race must be addressed, along with gender and age, as an inhibiting factor regarding mentorship and advancement opportunities for black women who aspire to

positions in educational leadership. "Mentoring was found to greatly facilitate Black women in not only obtaining a superintendency but also maintaining and retaining their position" (Alston, 2000, p. 529).

      Gendered mentoring. If women, as a broad grouping that includes other minority categories constitute the overarching minority within educational leadership, especially the superintendency, public schools and agencies should explicitly provide opportunities that address women—in general, as well as specific to women of color—in order to bridge the gaps in current networking practices. While in today's world, schools regularly follow the lead of business practices (Peck & Reitzug, 2012), they seem to have not opted to fully implement, or implement with genuine fidelity, the practice of intentional development of talent through explicit mentoring and networking initiatives. As an aspiring female superintendent, I have struggled and have spoken to others who have struggled to find a mentor who is female. This is a barrier that must be addressed and conquered by aspiring female superintendents, and especially black female superintendents, in order for the statistics and status quo to change relative to increasing the numbers of women district leaders. According to Brunner (1995), aspiring female superintendents must "stalk" the superintendency so that the pool of available mentors and sponsors, who share gender and even gendered race characteristics, will grow (as cited in Alston, 2000, p. 259). As a side note, the chances of working under the leadership of a woman superintendent typically increase with the size of the district (p. 76). Consequently, according to Brunner and Grogan (2007), "Same-sex mentors and role models are important for anyone who aspires to climb the career ladder" (p. 76).

There are major differences involved in mentoring men versus mentoring women, and these differences should be introduced and celebrated through professional development of both the mentor and the mentee. A 1991 study conducted by Ann Schneider revealed the following gender-related differences in mentoring:

- Women require more feedback and frequent monitoring to develop assurance.
- Mentors need to model and reinforce strategies more frequently with women.
- Women need more mentor-initiated contact.
- Relationships with women are longer in term.
- Women remain in a readiness phase longer than do men. (The women felt they needed more time to prepare for the role to which they aspired.)
- Women spend more time in each mentoring stage.
- Men who mentor women must expect that personal crises and individual needs will surface in the mentoring relationship.
  (as cited in Witmer, 2006, p. 261)

Improved access to mentoring. In order to improve access to mentoring relationships and successful advancement opportunities for aspiring black female executives, professional black women need to serve as mentors and networking participants, despite the scarcity of black female superintendents. In the following passage, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1989) addressed the challenges faced by black women across the intersections of race, gender, and class, highlighting their life experiences as sources of strength and wisdom for achieving their professional goals.

Black women need wisdom to know how to deal with the "educated fools" who would "take a shotgun to a roach." As members of a subordinate group, Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type, for their devalued status denies them the protections that white skin, maleness, and wealth confer. This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to Black women's survival. In the context of race, gender, and class oppression, the distinction is essential since knowledge without

wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate. (p. 759)

Referring back to the AASA study of women and the superintendency referenced earlier, 60% of women desiring and not desiring the superintendency responded affirmatively to receiving assistance with acquiring their jobs (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). "The AASA study of the American superintendency found that two-thirds of superintendents had been mentored by other superintendents during their careers and 78 percent of them had mentored a colleague" (Brunner & Björk, 2001, p. 45). Furthermore, Björk (2001) found that "mentors are very successful in influencing superintendents' careers from beginning to end" (p. 45).

Along with acknowledging the differences (and potential best practices) involved in mentoring women versus men, considerable and intentional matching of mentors and mentees should also be made based on "crucial traits, such as educational philosophy and physical proximity, [and] is very important to the success of the relationship" (Alston, 2000, p. 529). Relative to his focus on mentoring, the aspirations of black female professionals in education, and the superintendency, Alston (2000) offered the following suggestions:

1. Professors in administrator preparation programs could take the lead and begin to collaborate more with leaders in school districts to identify qualified Black women to train for the superintendency. Many times, women are identified and trained for the principalship; however, encouragement toward the superintendency must be intentional and purposeful.

2. Formal mentoring programs must be in place to maintain and retain Black women in the superintendency. These programs could be directed through administrative preparation programs, school districts, or other organizations.

3. Professional organizations such as the National Alliance of Black School Educators and the American Association of School Administrators must also step up to the forefront on this issue to develop programs, workshops, summits, and so on specifically geared toward saving the endangered species, Black female superintendents. (pp. 529–530)

Community Supports

In the event that Black women aspirants to the superintendent position are unable to find current black female superintendents as their mentors, the neighborhood and community structure within the Black community can often offer supports not readily accessible elsewhere.

In traditional African-American communities, Black women find considerable institutional support for valuing concrete experience. Black extended families and Black churches are two key institutions where Black women experts with concrete knowledge of what it takes to be self-defined Black women share their knowledge with their younger, less experienced sisters. This relationship of sisterhood among Black women can be seen as a model for a whole series of relationships that African-American women have with each other, whether it is networks among women in extended families, among women in the Black church, or among women in the African-American community at large. (Collins, 1989, p. 762)

Consequently, mentoring participation must be voluntary on both parts so that the relationship is authentic and can flourish; however, formal mentoring programs are much easier and beneficial for minorities and women. Formal mentoring programs within organizations do not rely on established connection needed of informal mentoring. (Witmer, 2006, p. 261)

Mentorship increases access to promotions in any professional arena, which is why there are countless business programs that actively encourage networking and

mentoring for their under-represented groups. In the educational realm, superintendents

train and promote other future-superintendents. Some would call this insider training,

and it should improve the pool of qualified applicants because the underlying assumption

is that those identified would have been guided throughout their career paths to become

competent and successful superintendents. This common practice means that women

could, potentially, have a much higher success rate of obtaining administrative positions

if there is someone available, serving in the role of mentor, to lend support and guidance

before, during, and after the process; however, "it is often common practice for women

administrators to experience no mentoring throughout their career trajectory" (Gardiner,

Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000, p. 45). "In general women lack mentoring since it has been

more often associated with the male model of grooming the next generation of leaders"

(Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007, p. 111) According to Marshall

(1985),

> The most powerful training and mobility structure in the educational
> administration career, the sponsor-protégé relationship, occurs when a powerful
> person notices, tests, trains, and promotes a protégé. The sponsor-protégé
> relationship is a close and personal one. Male sponsors are reluctant to invest
> their efforts in women because women are different and because close
> male/female relationships most often are seen as non-professional. (as cited in
> Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 42)

Mentoring and networking are two of the primary support systems documented as

consistently producing professional success for all parties affected. While both are touted

as important, they are not the only strategies and tools that impact success. This study

will introduce additional supports that can assist in overcoming barriers to becoming a

school district leader for African American women. Some of the barriers include

perceptions of leadership styles and career mobility and preparation.

Gendered Perceptions of Leadership Styles

Society's norms dictate the expectations placed upon various disenfranchised or

silenced groups, including women. Traditionally, women were expected to remain home

and provide support for the man of the home by taking care of domestic duties, such as

providing meals and the rearing of children. Over time, growing economic needs and the

influence of the Women's Liberation Movement have changed the overwhelming

expectation that women remain in the home and not seek outside employment.

Nonetheless, society has continuously relegated women to subservient positions and

roles, both in the home and in the workplace. This conflict between the needs and roles

of women in the workplace with the societal norms still placed upon them creates a

precarious working environment for women, one that often reinforces negative

perceptions of women and their professional capabilities. As reflected in the 2007 AASA

commissioned study of women in the superintendency, the three most frequently cited

barriers for pursuing the superintendency centered on issues concerning family

relocation, perceptions of women as less capable than men for the challenges of the

superintendency, and the perception that women are limited in terms of managerial

experience and skills. According to the study, 34% of respondents shared that the "lack

of mobility of family members" limited their access to administrative positions, due to

the common and regular need to relocate for positions; 29% of respondents agreed that a

perception existed that women are not as capable as men to handle the political aspects of

the position; and 25% believed that there is a perception that an emphasis and background in curricular and instructional specialties limited administrative and managerial interest and/or skills (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

In addition to the demands of the family roles filled by women, leadership differences between men and women may sometimes serve as barriers to women's achievement of the superintendency since, "women are penalized not only when they don't act like men, since they are seen as incompetent, but also when they do act like men, because they are perceived as cold" (Shakeshaft et al., 2007, p. 109). Furthermore, while women's democratically-oriented and caring leadership attributes are positive and beneficial to leadership in general, women often feel the need to change and adopt a leadership style more like that of a man in order to succeed (Reed, 2012). Men are still the dominant force in society and yield the most power through their positions of influence, consequently often setting the bar and expectations for accepted norms in a variety of workplace environments. In turn, women are still the minority of top-level executives, even in business (Reed, 2012). The Mountford (2001) study of school board power dynamics and its effect on decision making, including a secondary analysis of its findings (Mountford & Brunner, 2010), has shown that expectations are gendered and create a double standard for women who are expected to be as efficient as men, but not as authoritative. It appears that women can be vocal, but only if they do not micromanage and are collaborative in decision making, whereas the men who yield the most influence on boards are those who do both (Mountford & Brunner, 2010).

Career Mobility and Preparation

The path to the superintendency has been publicized and normed as the path taken by white men due to the omitted and thus silenced voices of minorities and women. This path is often vertical, which allows a male to reach the superintendency at a faster rate, on average 5-10 years sooner than a woman (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Clearly, this is not the same route that women traditionally take to acquire the superintendency. Because the routes that women and men take are different, neither should be elevated above the other due to most women's lack of access to the vertical route from which men typically benefit. The route traditionally available to women has, at times, been misinterpreted as indicating a lack of interest in the superintendency despite various factors proving otherwise (Brunner & Kim, 2010). The similarities and differences in traveled paths are best understood through the Organizational Career Mobility theory (OCM) (Kanter, 1977) that analyzes the career moves of men and women, along with the causes and effects of those moves through low mobility and high mobility career choices.

The career path to the superintendency for men traditionally moves from a secondary teacher, to an athletic coach, to a secondary assistant principal, to a secondary principal, to assistant superintendent, and then to superintendent. More men than women move directly from the secondary principalship to the superintendency without working in central office positions first (Kim & Brunner, 2009). This opportunity, or the relationship of present position to larger structure and future critical positions (Kanter, 1977), is not often afforded or available to women. Since most women work in elementary schools where positions of leadership are very limited, there are few

opportunities for department head, head coaching, or assistant principalship experiences that would allow a woman to exhibit leadership skills and gain more exposure. As such, elementary teachers have diminished chances of reaching administration due to the lack of visibility, and again elementary teachers are overwhelmingly women. Consequently, women are more likely to move from a teacher, to club advisor, to principal, to director/coordinator, to assistant superintendent, and then to superintendent. Fifty percent of women worked in central office positions after leaving their principalships and before assuming a superintendent position. As shown by the research, comparing the distinct routes or paths typically taken by men versus women for the superintendency, men are twice as likely to go from teacher to principal and straight to superintendent than women (Kim & Brunner, 2009, pp. 95–96).

While historically research has shown that not all principalships consistently improve chances for the superintendency, secondary principalships specifically, are yet considered the primary prerequisite for access to the superintendency. This generalization is also normalized for males. On the other hand, women and minorities have been found to take much more diverse and "non-linear" paths to the superintendency, sometimes taking a longer amount of time, but possibly better preparing them for long-term success once in the position (Brunner & Kim, 2010).

Older research continues to confuse the path to the superintendency for women through its repeated and long-standing use of a normed path to the superintendency that is in fact the path of white male superintendents. This normed path has emerged because the research data has not consistently disaggregated minorities and women. Further,

white males have historically made up the vast majority of superintendents. Consequently, "Wiggins and Coggins (1986) reported that women's career paths hinder progress to top administrative positions. Sixty-three percent of current women superintendents have secondary teaching experience" (Miller, Washington, & Fiene, 2006, pp. 223–224). Yet, most women are found in elementary principalships, in contrast to the fact that the route to the superintendency typically begins at the secondary level (Miller et al., 2006). Women must be aware of this fact, if the superintendency is their desired position.

The path for women does not have to change, but knowledge that secondary experience creates access to the superintendency should be a consideration when seeking this position. This scenario would lead the typical female aspirant to the superintendency, not necessarily well-versed on the male versus female pathways to leadership, to wonder why beginning her educational career in the elementary setting could tend to derail her path to the superintendency, especially since it is traditionally understood that elementary principals have a more instructional focus and thus become stronger instructional leaders. Therefore, on this point and from a more positive perspective, I am suggesting that alternative paths and detours still allow people to reach their desired destinations and sometimes in a more efficient manner. The same may be true of the superintendency.

The superintendency has often been characterized as a highly political and extremely stressful position, often said to not be of much interest to most women (Glass et al., 2000). However, the data from recent studies conducted on women speak to the

contrary. As such, low aspirations cannot be the only reason why only 18% of superintendents are women, especially considering the fact that almost 40% of women in central office positions aspire to the superintendency (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Due to the conflicting research and literature available on the topic of female superintendents, I believe that there is no one definitive answer as to why women are still the minority in regards to the superintendency. At the same time, I do believe that the discrepancy has been exacerbated by literature that has favored males and their styles of school leadership, while failing to recognize the value of female contributions to education and especially women's unique approaches to school leadership that can translate effectively to the superintendency.

The Future of the Female Superintendency

In order to increase the opportunities available to female superintendent aspirants, information and statistics regarding the commonalities shared among female superintendents would prove beneficial in terms of providing a better understanding of women's pathways to successfully obtaining this position. Armed with this understanding, and completing the professional training and certification required for the superintendency, women aspirants and superintendents appear to be more prepared relative to degrees and other certifications they already hold. In fact, according to Glass et al. (2000), more female superintendents (56.8 %) hold doctoral degrees than male superintendents (44.7%) (p. 80). The AASA study of female superintendents and female central office personnel revealed a higher percentage of doctoral degrees are held by female superintendents (57.6%) and aspirants (56.4%) to the superintendency than those

central office personnel who do not desire the position of superintendent (36.7%) (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 70). This data reinforces a connection between women superintendents (and aspirants) and their possession or pursuit of the doctoral degree (p. 73). Another similarity among female superintendents and aspirants is their overall membership in a greater number of professional organizations than non-aspirants. Female superintendents and those interested in moving into the position frequently cited membership in the American Association for School Administrators (AASA), the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), and state level AASA (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, pp. 73–75).

Women are making strides in educational leadership and even in the superintendency. According to the AASA survey of women superintendents and central office personnel, once women decide to actively seek the position of superintendent, "57% were successful in less than a year of entering the pool, and another 16% took a year to secure their first superintendency" (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 87), while "women of color are twice as likely as white women to have to wait 4 or more years" (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 87). "Thirty-six percent of white women had become superintendent by age 45 compared to 28% of women of color" (p. 110), according to the AASA study of women and the superintendency. This paints a very optimistic view for women superintendents as a whole but still points to the inequities yet in place for women of color when compared to the student demographics in school districts across the country.

The road to the superintendency is different for women of color as outlined by the results of the AASA study of women and the superintendency, recognized as the first national study of the superintendency that disaggregated data by gender and race. Results showed that there were approximately four times as many women of color superintendents in urban districts than white women (27% compared to 7%); more women of color were employed by districts of 10,000 or more students than white women (approximately one-half compared to one-third); and women of color were twice as likely to have held elementary assistant principalships, junior high/middle school assistant principalships, and high school principalships than white women (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). All of the additional steps or positional changes on the way to the superintendency explain why it takes women of color longer to reach the superintendency.

Finally, there are some surprising differences pertaining to the career journeys of women of color, according to the AASA study of women and the superintendency. These include, being "tapped for administration earlier than their white counterparts" (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 113), as noted by their earlier departure from classroom teaching; more women of color having worked in districts led by female superintendents; and more women of color having attained higher levels of education than white women (61% with doctorates compared to 52% of white women) (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

The history of the superintendency, barriers to attainment for women, professional and personal support systems to overcome barriers, perceptions of women's leadership, career mobility and preparation trends and patterns, and the future of the female

superintendent have all been shared using available research. The lack of access to the superintendency for women has been widely researched; however, the black woman has been absorbed and silenced within the research through inclusion. In order to understand the plight of the black woman, the group must be studied separately from black men and white women. In the next section, research relating to an epistemology that relates specifically to black women is introduced and connected to the study of black women school district leaders.

Black Feminist Thought (Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology)

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and/or Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology are fairly young approaches to research, but they have long been needed to study a very distinct group of individuals who face a reality that is uniquely their own. Black Feminist Thought is research

> furnished by experts who are part of a group and who express the group's standpoint. The two levels of knowledge are interdependent; while Black feminist thought articulates the taken-for-granted knowledge of African-American women, it also encourages all Black women to create new self-definitions that validate a Black women's standpoint. (Collins, 1989, p. 750)

This standpoint emerges from the intersectionality of race, gender, and class that Black women embody. In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality theory, and it gained prominence in the 1990's when sociologist Patricia Hill Collins reintroduced the idea as part of her discussion of Black feminism (Grant & Zwier, 2012). Intersectionality theory is a "social science theory used to examine cultural and social

categories of discrimination and their multiple and simultaneous interactions that

contribute to or produce systematic social inequality" (Grant & Zwier, 2012, p. 1264).

> While an oppressed group's experiences may put them in a position to see things differently, their lack of control over the apparatuses of society that sustain ideological hegemony makes the articulation of their self-defined standpoint difficult. Groups unequal in power are correspondingly unequal in their access to the resources necessary to implement their perspectives outside their particular group . . . self-defined standpoints can stimulate oppressed groups to resist their domination. (Collins, 1989, p. 749)

As a Black woman, I am in a position to see and experience the oppression that I

have the opportunity to uncover. The submission and publication of this study will add

another layer of often-overlooked or silenced Black female voices about our struggles

and triumphs in a professional world that we are working to change. This study could

have been designed and presented in a variety of ways that may have made the outcome

more marketable but it may have failed to serve the original purpose of uplifting the

voices of Black women for other Black women. I aim to "make creative use of [my]

outsider-within status and produce innovative Black feminist thought" (Collins, 1989, p.

771). As stated by Patricia Hill Collins (1989),

> [t]hose Black women with academic credentials who seek to exert the authority that their status grants them to propose new knowledge claims about African-American women face pressures to use their authority to help legitimate a system that devalues and excludes the majority of Black women. (p. 753)

One of the most unique characteristics of Black Feminist Thought is the requirement that

the researcher and/or scholar be a Black woman, which "is a necessary prerequisite for

producing Black feminist thought because within Black women's communities thought is

validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and

epistemological conditions" (Collins, 1989, p. 770). Black Feminist Thought reflects

"both the Afrocentric and the feminist standpoints" (Collins, 1989, p. 756). Black

women cannot separate themselves from our race or gender so we must stand tall in all of

our truths and identities.

> While an Afrocentric feminist epistemology reflects elements of epistemologies
> used by Blacks as a group and women as a group, it also paradoxically
> demonstrates features that may be unique to Black women. On certain
> dimensions, Black women may more closely resemble Black men, on others,
> white women, and on still others, Black women may stand apart from both
> groups. Black feminist sociologist Deborah K. King describes this phenomenon
> as a "both/or" orientation, the act of being simultaneously a member of a group
> and yet standing apart from it. She suggests that multiple realities among Black
> women yield a "multiple consciousness in Black women's politics" and that this
> state of belonging yet not belonging forms an integral part of Black women's
> oppositional consciousness. (Collins, 1989, p. 757)

The use of qualitative study is the preferred research method of Black Feminist

Thought, as best explained by a participant in an interview on Black Feminism,

> [o]ur speech is most directly personal, and every black person assumes that every
> other black person has a right to a personal opinion. In speaking of grave matters,
> your personal experience is considered very good evidence. With us, distant
> statistics are certainly not as important as the actual experience of a sober person.
> (p. 759)

Rather than using more conventional, empirical methods of researching and

substantiating data, Black Feminist Thought "rearticulat[es] a preexisting Black women's

standpoint and re-center[s] the language of existing academic discourse to accommodate

these knowledge claims" (Collins, 1989, p.772). All interviews were conducted with the

participation of Black women and were facilitated by a Black woman thus privileging the experiences of the participant. Their dialogue and experiences are key to the creation of meaning.

The critical lens used for this study of African American female school district leaders is Black Feminist Thought because it uncovers the intersecting oppressions and empowers the women affect simultaneously through the leveraged lived experiences and voices of an often silenced group—black women. While there are many disparities within the demographic representation of this country's superintendents, I am focusing only on African American women and Black Feminist Thought is the appropriate fit for such a study.

Conclusion

The disparity and inequities within the American superintendency is glaring, considering the lack of female and almost non-existent presence of African American females within the ranks. While bias and barriers exist, increasing knowledge and awareness about the problem is the first step in rectifying this issue that affects those without access but it also limits the educational outcomes of America's children by not including the needed diversity in leadership. By becoming knowledgeable about the research and learning from the experiences and voices of other women superintendents - especially the frequently silenced voices of women of color who are superintendents – current women superintendents can prove themselves to be effective mentors and role models for those women who are seeking direction towards district level leadership and thus increase access. The AASA study of women and central office personnel revealed

that the field of educational leadership is changing, but not rapidly enough; further, that there is no one path to the superintendency, but rather a series of paths that the individual aspirant must choose to travel in order to secure her desired position in school district executive leadership, as well as to advance progress for organizational change. Women are qualified to lead, and with proper and systematic support systems, aspirations can be realized.

The review of literature included barriers to district level leadership, support systems to add in obtaining district level leadership, and information about the lens used to study participants and their experiences. The methodology selected for this research study will be discussed in the following chapter, Chapter III.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The goal of this study is to uncover and spotlight the experiences of black female school district leaders in regards to barriers faced and the support systems that have allowed them access to leadership ranks that are disproportionately filled by white men.

This research study is deeply rooted in the Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2009), using the methodology of a qualitative interview study and facilitated through using open-ended interview questions and researcher observations. I begin this chapter by first addressing Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical lens that provides a particular focus to the study, informing my perspective as researcher and my analyses of the study outcomes, along with an explanation of qualitative interview study as the methodological construct around which this research process has been framed and implemented.

Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminist Thought represents a theoretical lens or framework that explores the lives of black women through critical approaches to research that include and explore the intersections of black women's existence as multiply-identified human beings. As such, their social and professional lives are often impacted by negative, socially constructed labels and stereotypes associated with both gender and race. Like Critical

Feminism before it, Black Feminist Thought is not as widely accepted or exercised as often as other epistemologies and interpretive frameworks that are considered more mainstream within the qualitative methodological paradigm, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, case studies, etc. Moreover, considering the scarcity of women scholars facilitating studies in the name of feminism, Black Feminist Thought is that much more of a rarity with its intended focus on black women. In order to carve out a voice for Black women, "Black feminists aim to develop new theoretical interpretations of the interaction itself" (Collins, 1986, p. 20) rather than forcing feminist research to fit into more traditionally accepted types of study.

Four dimensions of Black Feminist Thought underscore research as it specifically pertains to black women:

- the lived experiences of black women as a criterion for making meaning of their experiences and their ways of being in the world,
- use of dialogue,
- ethics of personal accountability, and
- the ethic of care (Collins, 2009).

Black Feminist Thought is the theoretical lens used to conduct this study because it focuses exclusively on black women, thus providing me a research mode with which I can more adequately examine and define the realities of study participants' identities and their positions in district executive leadership roles, aligning with their experiences as Black women from personal and professional perspectives. In order to remain true to the

tenets of Black Feminist Thought as my chosen theoretical lens/method for this study, I

rely on a qualitative approach to actually conduct the research.

Qualitative Research Study

It is important to draw distinctions between the term "qualitative research," as it is

widely used and understood, and what is meant by a "generic qualitative study."

Generally speaking, "Qualitative research is a way of knowing in which a researcher

gathers, organizes, and interprets information obtained from humans using his or her eyes

and ears as filters" (Lichtman, 2010, p. 5). For Black Feminist Thought, however, this is

better accomplished through a qualitative study that will place emphasis on the

participants and their experiences rather than a different type of methodology or theory.

> Basic or generic qualitative studies have the essential characteristics of qualitative
> research (goal of eliciting understanding and meaning, researcher as primary data
> collector and analysis instrument, use of fieldwork, inductive orientation to
> analysis, richly descriptive findings) but do not focus on culture, build grounded
> theory, or intensely study a single unit or bounded system. They 'simply seek to
> discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and
> worldviews of the people involved.' (Merriam, 1998, p. 11)

Therefore, as the researcher of selected black women professionals in education, and

using the lens of Black Feminist Thought within a generic qualitative study approach that

seeks and validates their particular voices, I plan to simply be a vessel--a vessel taking in

the experiences shared by study participants (and thus the experts) as well as observing

how these women make meaning of their experiences as Black female superintendents

and district administrators.

Since the advent of qualitative research methods, scholars have needed to defend

the usefulness and the validity of qualitative research in comparison to the more

empirical and traditionally accepted quantitative studies. Consequently, and with time,

more journals and institutions are accepting qualitative studies, but the use of generic

qualitative studies has not yet become common practice. According to Caelli et al.

(2003), "theoretical positioning of the researcher, congruence between methodology and

methods, strategies to establish rigor, and analytic lenses through which data are

examined" (p. 9) are the criteria for establishing credibility within a generic qualitative

study. Caelli et al (2003) also asserted,

> at a minimum researchers employing a generic approach must explicitly identify
> their disciplinary affiliation, what brought them to the question, and the
> assumptions they make about the topic of interest. In their report, investigators
> must also demonstrate congruence between the questions posed and the generic
> approach employed. (p. 11)

To ensure clarity and transparency in this research study, I am identifying some

important definitions and making distinctions for the basis of this study. A research

method is a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence. A methodology

is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed. An epistemology is a

theory of knowledge (Harding, 1987). Since the focus of this study is an oppressed group

(Black women), methods, methodology, and epistemology were chosen that "legitimate

women as knowers" (Harding, 1987, p. 3).

The open-ended nature of this study is predicated on acknowledgement of the role

of each participant as the expert on her particular experiences leading to her successful

attainment of the superintendency or other executive-level, district position. Specifically, participants are cast in the role of experts through use of the semi-structured interview protocol that will begin with a set of interview questions while allowing for follow-up based on outcomes. The research will focus primarily on the lived experiences of black female school district executives. Consequently, and in line with Black Feminist Thought and generic qualitative study, meaning will be gathered from the interviewee through a dialogue that will likely unveil possibilities and directions that will prove mutually beneficial not only to the study participant herself, but also to other black women in education with whom she interacts now and others with whom she might interact in the future. Finally, as a result of gathering, analyzing, and reporting this kind of first-person, expert feedback, I propose that a generic qualitative research process can serve as a valuable resource of ready-found knowledge that can be used to inform the lives of both current black, female educational administrators as well as new aspirants seeking executive positions in education.

Study Participants

In this study, I interviewed 13 black female education executives—seven who currently hold executive-level district leadership positions and are qualified to seek the position of superintendent and six who are currently district superintendents. In order to identify possible participants, I networked using resources and connections to district/state level executives in order to search for personal connections to current district-level leaders who have obtained the position of Assistant Superintendent (or the district equivalent) or higher and/or district superintendents. Once I secured a participant,

I used the "snowball" effect, which entailed participants recommending other possible participants and making those connections on my behalf. In order to compare and contrast experiences and characteristics among the female executives, I selected and interviewed participants who shared certain attributes, such as having completed a doctoral degree, holding superintendency licensure, and having served as a principal and/or some other central office administrative role. This selection process was key, ensuring that all participants had the minimum qualifications and experiences that traditionally precede achievement of the superintendency.

As part of the methods or steps I took to develop the course of my research, I cultivated relationships with participants before the start of the data collection process. As shared by Reissman (1993), the story is "being told to particular people (i.e., me); it might have taken a different form if someone else were the listener" (p. 11). On this point, it is important to recognize that executive-level district leadership is a political position and often warrants maintaining distance between individuals with whom some form of trust or connection has not already been established. Clearly, this is due to the public nature of the profession and the high visibility of the superintendency and other executive level positions. Consequently, rapport between researcher and interviewees needed to be established in order to open the lines of communication for the interview process. On the understanding that rapport leads to trust, Webster (1986) stresses the importance of trust and defines it as the "firm belief or confidence in the honesty, integrity, reliability, justice, etc. of another person or thing" (as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 141). From my point of view as researcher, my success in creating relationships based on

rapport and trust with my study participants was fundamental to the integrity of this study. Building rapport with study participants should be easier if the researcher is understood as an insider (Pillow, 2003), in this case as an insider within the realm of education administrators and particularly black women education administrators. As an administrator and as an African American female, I am better positioned to understand my participant's "social and political structure" as well as the "formal and informal loci of power" (Glesne, 2011, p. 143).

Overview of Study Participants

As an outsider-within, I anticipated a kindred connection between the participants and myself. We were after all successful black women working to advance change in educational leadership. In retrospect, I realize that I had unrealistic expectations for relationship building that became very evident in my attempts to solidify the involvement of those individuals contacted as potential study participants.

At the start, nine superintendents were invited to participate in this study, with eight responding. It should be noted that a third party individual served as the first point of contact with the invited women, introducing me and the purpose of my study so that the shared contact could allow for more familiarity that could not be established by myself due to time constraints. One of the eight dropped out due to deadlines that conflicted with the study schedule, and one had a family crisis that prevented her from participating. Two of the remaining six offered non-professional locations for interviews, while two were only willing to conduct phone interviews despite my willingness to travel to their locations. Notably, the three superintendents from the southern region of the

country were more responsive to email requests, as well as more open to face-to-face interviews than the others who were contacted earlier. Moreover, those three women were the last invited (by approximately three weeks), but the first to return their letters of support (by approximately two-three weeks).

Acknowledging that all the women contacted are busy is an understatement. In fact, some of these superintendents have more employees than many Fortune 500 companies, and yet all six of the superintendent participants agreed to set aside time to assist me in my doctoral study by offering to share their experiences as school district leaders and as mentors from which others could learn.

The data collected from the superintendents was extremely insightful. However, due to my desire to not overwhelm their schedules, I expanded the study to include school district executives currently holding other positions but who are qualified to assume the position of a superintendent. Ultimately, my desire to broaden the participant base in this way morphed into a desire to provide information about female African American school district leaders, regardless of whether or not a particular individual desired the superintendency, so that choices and opportunities could be actualized. The impact of support systems, or a lack thereof, was a major motif or theme that presented itself differently in each participant's experience, but the impact resounded throughout. In the end, eight non-superintendent district leaders were contacted, and seven were able to make time to participate in the interviews. Overall, the number of study participants totaled 13 with each participant being interviewed once that totaled approximately 16 interview hours, and I member checked with all participants, except one who could not be

reached due to a change in position. The process of member checking included emailing

the participants a copy of our transcribed interview. On the email address of their choice,

I reiterated my gratitude for them participating in this study and invited them to send me

any corrections to the transcription so that the transcripts remained true to their

experiences. Only one of the participants requested revisions to the transcriptions and

that was to correct the spelling of a location.

<div align="center">**Organization of Study Reporting Process:**</div>

<div align="center">**Participant Descriptions and Interview/Study Findings**</div>

This study is intended to investigate and share the experiences of African

American female school district leaders, non-superintendent leaders and superintendents,

and the effect of support systems on their experiences. I have organized my study

reporting process according to two distinctive groupings of study participants: Group

One, those participants who were not district superintendents at the time of their

interviews; and Group Two, those participants who were actually serving in the role of

superintendent at the time of their interviews. Analyzing and reporting on each group of

women separately—starting with Group One, followed by Group Two—I use the same

organizational format for presenting my findings. For each group then, I begin the

reporting process by first identifying each of the women with a representative pseudonym

and a brief description of her nature/leadership style as I have perceived it. I follow with

analyses of my research findings, including excerpts from participant interviews

according to group, with such findings to be cross-referenced among all the women in

Chapter V. Within the major findings that emerged from all the participants' descriptions of their experiences are the following themes:

1. route to district level leadership,

2. politics,

3. barriers to success.

Other themes revealed during the study pertain to the availability and importance of professional support systems, including:

1. networks,

2. mentors, and

3. mentoring others.

Group One: School District Level Leaders (Non-Superintendent)

Descriptions of participants. Of my 13 study participants, seven were school district leaders, some of whom were not at all interested in pursuing the superintendency. There were many similarities among these participants, but their differences resounded enough to lend to my referencing them with pseudonyms. Standout quotations were the basis for pseudonym creation, with each pseudonym serving to summarize and, thus, represent the participant's place and view of her career journey towards educational leadership. The participants are described and quoted as follows:

The crusader.

> It is now my desire to be the superintendent of a district that is struggling. I want transformation. I want a challenge. I want a district that needs someone who has that vision for altering the course of life for kids. I want to impact the lives of children in a positive way, and I see no better group of kids to do it than those who are unfortunately in poverty.

The Crusader was a district leader who desired and was seeking her first superintendency. She remained transparent about her desires and her stance as a Black woman, as well as regarding her perceived duty to the community that she desired to serve. The Crusader has since moved on to accept her first superintendency which is, as she stated, located in a high-poverty community.

The balancer.

Women, period, have much more responsibility than men . . . we are expected to be the breadwinner of a family, but we're [also] expected to be the mother, if you have children. And so that in itself is . . . a fulltime job, if you want to do it, whether you do it right or wrong, it's a fulltime job.

The Balancer no longer desired the superintendency due to her making a previous decision to take a "backseat" to her husband's career. Now divorced, she is closer to retirement and has created systems to ensure that she balances her career with her responsibilities as a single mother.

The supporter.

We have to . . . really make sure that we are embracing individuals and helping people to move forward. So for me, my philosophy is . . . others helped me get to where I am today, so I have a responsibility to help others.

The Supporter spoke about her support systems and the individuals who encouraged her to continue excelling in her career field. She took this as a need to pay it forward by giving back to those who need help or guidance. She shared that she has provided feedback on resumes and has helped several individuals attain promotions into administrative or other desired positions.

The counselor.

> (Sharing a memory of what someone said about the impact of her training as a counselor; on her treatment of people throughout the years) "She was a teacher, she was a counselor, and she also would tell us that counseling helped her to better understand how to treat people and how to embrace things and how to listen." I think that's one of the things that a lot of our administrators run up against. They don't listen, they don't stop to really pay attention, and as a result, we kind of get it wrong sometimes.

The Counselor shared the most memories during her interview, and was also a profound listener. She shared that she relied heavily on her counseling background as a former school building administrator and now, as a district level administrator, to make sure that she treated people with dignity. Despite being a highly respected expert in her field, she shared that she had no interest in the superintendency.

The floater.

> My story may be a little bit different—where you say some other people, they didn't know how to open that door or go through the door, mine was opened for me. . . . Why do I want to do this? It was more so because the opportunity was there. There wasn't a lot of us at all, and I know that sometimes when those opportunities come through, whether you're ready or not, or whether you think you're not ready or not, you just have to step into it . . . and I have been rolling ever since.

The Floater shared that she did not actively plan her career route. Rather, opportunities seemed to present themselves, and she was led to the next position. She was unsure about her future career moves, sharing that although she was not interested in the superintendency, she may be led to that role later in life.

The evaluator.

> I realized that my expectations were very low compared to theirs (former corporate employer). I think that has changed my mind, and it probably makes me tougher probably now as a leader than I was before because I think our standards (education field) should be even higher than what a corporate company has.

The Evaluator appeared to have high standards for others and, most importantly, for herself. She stressed the need to be the best and to set oneself apart from others through exemplary performance. Despite her sharing a "50/50" like of the superintendency and its roles and responsibilities, she appeared to be moving into the direction of a superintendency.

The learner.

> I was just always, just always wanted to learn, so I would get his (father's) books. I would come to his actual summer lectures and sit back in the class and watch him teach. I developed my love for teaching, so fast forwarding, that's kind of [me].

The Learner shared that her father's background in education led her to develop a love of learning. With several certifications and degrees, she expressed a desire to acquire more because she loved to learn about a variety of topics and fields. She was interested in pursuing the superintendency, which led to her moving into different positions so that she could learn the different aspects of how school systems work.

Group Two: Superintendents

     Descriptions of participants. The superintendency is the still the pinnacle position of authority and power in the American education system today. African American female superintendents are few and far between, but definite powerhouses when you encounter one. The experiences of superintendents who are African American women reveal similarities while their differences resounded enough to lend to their pseudonyms. Standout quotations became the basis for pseudonym creation and summarized the superintendent's place and view of their career journeys towards educational leadership. Following are the pseudonyms and descriptions of the participating superintendents:

     The loner.

> It's lonely but, you know, if you have a good family around you that helps. I have one or two people that I confide in, and then I've found you can't even do that. It's just interesting that people don't necessarily want to see you doing well on top, they want you to have a struggle. I have enough struggles, believe me, I— you just don't know about them.

The Loner was extremely open and candid about the loneliness of the superintendency. In her interview, she shared the unique aspect of the superintendency that is quite difficult for many to overcome, the loneliness that comes with such a politically charged and targeted position.

     The mover.

> After being a principal, I moved to another district (for a promotion). Then after our superintendent left to go to another district, we had an interim superintendent appointed, and then I was appointed as the assistant superintendent or they called

it a deputy superintendent. I received a promotion within a year's time. And then after that, when I became a deputy superintendent, that's when I was contacted by different search firms to pursue the superintendency.

When we (family) look at what opportunities are presented, we look at how it will impact the entire family, what will be the opportunities and what will be the challenges. We also step out on faith. Honestly speaking, when you go from one side of the country to the other with absolutely no family, it took a lot of faith.

The Mover discussed her willingness to move for promotions, and how those decisions involved her entire family. Mobility seemed to be a major advantage for the Mover's career as she was readily available and poised for opportunities.

The collector.

I have a couple of ladies . . . in this area that we talk a lot. I think we're more of a support group than we are a mentor for one another. And then I also have people that I've worked with in the past. My husband says, you collect people everywhere you go, and I guess that's somewhat true . . . that's important, I think as you move from position to position—you continue to nurture relationships.

The Collector seemed to have the gift of collecting and connecting people throughout her career. In addition to remaining in contact with former colleagues, she was instrumental in establishing a support group for female superintendents in her state, sharing that the motivation for starting the support group originated from the short tenure of a female superintendent who may have experienced a lack of support.

The juggler.

You have to take care of your personal family, and those relationships are important. You have to give as much attention to that as you can and make the time for that, even though you are extremely busy.

The Juggler talked about her willingness to complete tasks that were not viewed as the direct role of a superintendent, but that needed to be done. She also shared how she fulfilled several roles in her small rural district while juggling being a wife and mother. She prioritized her family in her career decisions due to her child still being of school age.

The climber.

> My mother taught me that when you go in one door, you look for the exit. So I have continuously, since I was two years old, been in some sort of school trying to grow because in education, in order for you to get the top job, you have to be well educated . . . I believe in climbing. I just wanted to be the best, do the best.

The Climber was strategic in her career moves and she was proud of her legacy and reputation within the communities that she had served. She stressed being prepared or "papered up" so that one could take of advantage of the upcoming opportunity to affect more lives.

The negotiator.

> Your first contract will be your best one. Do research around what other people have gotten in contracts, what was in the last superintendent's contract . . . do your research before you settle for something.

The Negotiator shared experiences of having to fight and negotiate throughout her career as superintendent. Starting with her first contract that offered her less money than her predecessor, she fought and negotiated her contract and how she would be treated throughout her superintendency. The Negotiator's interview was heavy in contractual advice for aspiring district leaders, and she was explicit about the need to negotiate terms.

Study Ethics

Researcher Subjectivity

My experiences as a black female educational administrator guide my desire and quest for knowledge involving district level leadership. Those same experiences led me to seek out the perspectives of women who resemble myself in gender, ethnicity, and career path. Despite the scarcity of African American female school district executives, and serving as a prime motivator for this study, I want to ensure that the African-American female perspective is included in the literature despite its minority status and, possibly, experiences.

Throughout the research process, I have been intentional about my subjectivity and thus "at least disclose to [my] readers where self and subject became joined" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). As shared by Acker, Barry, and Esseveld in *Beyond Methodology* (1991),

> The research process becomes a dialogue between the researcher and researched, an effort to explore and clarify the topic under discussion, to clarify and expand understanding; both are assumed to be individuals who reflect upon their experience and who can communicate those reflections. This is inherent in the situation; neither the subjectivity of the researcher nor the subjectivity of the researched can be eliminated in the process. (p. 140)

In fact, I see my role as more of a learner and potential mentee than a researcher. Holding true to the tenets of Black Feminist Thought, I am a member of the group I study: Black Female Intellectuals. Also, like my participants, I am a school administrator who harbors possible desires to pursue the school district superintendency. Who I am as a subjective human being—personally, culturally, and professionally—has undoubtedly

shaped this study, serving as a platform of ongoing interest and commitment on both

personal and professional levels. As such, I see how this study has come to exist through

me. Casey (1995) spoke to the subjectivity of the researcher and the "self-disclosure" (p.

230) required of her. Throughout my research process, I have subscribed to this

subjective approach so that my study participants understood my motives and interest in

their stories. As shared by Lichtman (2010),

> [b]ecause it is the researcher who is the conduit through which all information
> flows, we need to recognize that the researcher shapes the research and, in fact, is
> shaped by the research. As a dynamic force, she constantly adapts and modifies
> her position with regard to the research topic, the manner in which questions are
> formulated, and the interpretations she gives to the data. (p. 121)

Researcher positionality. The researcher's positionality includes characteristics

that embody the researcher and can inform how participants and research may be viewed

and how participants may respond to the researcher (Glesne, 2011). As a black female

school administrator, I have often wondered if perceptions of me were different from

males, based on my gender and amplified by race. Women, in managerial positions, are

often faced with the conflict of being "too feminine or not feminine enough" (Miller et

al., 2006, p. 221). I often feel the need to remain approachable but not too emotional,

strong enough to handle tough situations but not intimidating. These contradictions make

it difficult for anyone to maneuver and hold significant implications for women to whom

such workplace contradictions are particularly applied.

My experience as a school leader has made me question what makes one person

more successful over another, especially when the differences may in part be

stereotypically gender-based and raced. I have worked with, and for, countless numbers of effective school and/or district leaders, and experience has taught me that men and women are received very differently. Throughout my career, I was always told that I operated like a male. As a teacher, I was given the "toughest" students. As an administrator, I have been assigned to the "toughest" schools. According to Brunner and Grogan (2007), women are more likely to be hired to be instructional leaders, and women of color are more likely to be hired as community leaders and change agents. I was once characterized by one of my superiors as a "pit bull in a skirt." I have been told that I was better suited for the environments that did not seem to require finesse; in other words, school environments in need of a turnaround leader. Would these statements or critiques occur if I had been born male? Would these general opinions affect or derail my career? All of these questions led me to seek out the assistance and advice of a mentor (someone who had accomplished what I desired to accomplish).

In this search, I found that I only knew of six female superintendents, only one of whom was an African-American female superintendent. As a young, African-American female, I believe that I aspire to be a superintendent, and therefore found this disturbing. All of the woman superintendents I encountered had obtained doctoral degrees and had experienced tremendous success in their previous positions. If this is the case, why are there still so few women in the ranks of district level school leadership?

As a Black, female school administrator, I will hold the outsider-within position, like many U.S. Black women intellectuals (Collins, 2009), due to the "exclusion of Black women's ideas from mainstream academic discourse" (p. 15). "Prevented from

becoming full insiders. . . . Black women remained in outsider-within locations, individuals whose marginality provided a distinctive angle of vision on these intellectual and political entities" (p. 15). As a Black woman, I can "use [my] outsider-within location in building coalitions and stimulating dialogue with others similarly located" (Collins, 2009, p. 42). As the outsider-within position relates to my research, this location can allow for much needed networking for myself and my study participants, potentially opening additional possibilities and access to findings for others.

Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity "generally involves critical reflection on how researcher, research participants, setting, and research procedures interact and influence each other" (Glesne, 2011, p. 151). My career in education grew from the admiration of a strong female educational leader who was my aunt and principal. As I decided to embark upon my journey into school administration, she was the first person on my list to call and consult. Throughout my time as a school administrator, I found that there was no shortage of female school-level administrators to serve as mentors and/or role models. During the course of my doctoral studies, the completion of which confers the doctoral degree that would qualify me for a superintendency, I found that the pool of experienced, women superintendents was dramatically smaller than building-level administrators who were women, and I wondered why. This shortage of women superintendents perplexed and worried me. Where were they? Why were they such a scarcity? Did this mean that, maybe, the experienced, women administrators knew something that I did not (and I was seeking an undesirable position)? This curiosity led me to begin researching the topic of

women and their career paths to obtaining the superintendency. This is also why I chose

to interview black females who both have the qualifications to be a district

superintendent, even if they did not aspire to do so.

Whenever interviewing and sharing the experiences of someone else, the

researcher must confront the issues of power to ensure that ethical practices are given

priority over the desired outcome of the research. As an aspiring district leader, studying

current district leaders who are in positions of authority over me, I must still be mindful

that power dynamics are yet in play, despite "studying up, inquiring into the lives and

behavior of the elite or politically powerful" (Glesne, 2011, p. 148). My current position

as a doctoral student who is conducting a research study, analyzing and presenting the

data, places me in a position of power to my participants that must be explicitly stated

and contextualized. As Kendall (2009) stated, "We are most likely to abuse our power

when we least feel we have it" (p. 115). As an African American female, I must remain

self-reflexive and share that I hold successful African American females to a very high

standard because of their ability to shatter stereotypes and, sometimes, perpetuate them.

I, too, have this same ability that I carry with me daily, and so I was surprised upon

realizing that I burdened others with the same expectations. This reflexivity led me to

research "with" the participants and allow them to "speak for themselves" (Pillow, 2003,

p. 179).

Researcher Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a very important factor in the research process because of the

impact that this study may have on the professional practices and career paths of others.

As quoted in Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the American Educational Research

Association (AERA) asserts,

> It is the researcher's responsibility to show the reader that the report can be trusted. This begins with the description of the evidence, the data, and the analysis supporting each interpretive claim. The warrant for the claims can be established through a variety of procedures including triangulation, asking participants to evaluate pattern descriptions, having different analysts examine the same data (independently and collaboratively), searches for disconfirming evidence and counter-interpretations. (p. 651)

To ensure that the final analysis of my research findings would be "true" to the lived

experiences of the participants, I transcribed interviews before beginning the analysis so

that the interpretations would be based on the authentic experiences and voices of the

participants and not dependent on perception or memory. Aligning with the practices of

Black Feminist Thought, analysis substantially involved the participants as the

recognized "experts" on their own experiences, furthering the idea that a prime purpose

of this type of study is to empower its participants. Therefore, in order to ensure that

participants would feel comfortable enough to share and co-create, transparency was

practiced "by clearly discussing the process of interpretation, highlighting the evidence

and alternative interpretations that serve as a warrant for each claim, providing contextual

commentary on each claim" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 651). In addition, the process

of member checking allowed participants an opportunity to read over transcripts to ensure

that they were represented appropriately. This transparency encouraged participants'

engagement in the interview process and increased the reproducibility of the study.

Finally, and true to feminist research, the following points were explicitly and

deliberately included in the research design:

- Triangulation of methods, data sources, and theories
- Reflexive subjectivity (some documentation of how the researcher's assumptions have been affected by the logic of the data)
- Face validity (established by recycling categories, emerging analysis, and conclusions back through at least a subsample of respondents)
- Catalytic validity (some documentation that the research process has led to insight and, ideally, activism on the part of the respondents). (Lather, 2003, p. 206)

Any ethical considerations were shared relative to their having bearing on the data and/or

analysis.

Research Questions

My primary research questions are:

1. What are the driving forces behind black female professionals pursuing or not

   pursuing the district level leadership?

2. What experiences with support systems lead or led to the district level

   leadership for black women?

Data Collection

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, each participant was interviewed for a

maximum of two hours each session. Each participant was provided a copy of the

transcription and verified by the participant for accuracy. All interviews began with an

open-ended, grand tour question that allowed participants to open up and become

comfortable with the dialogical process and resulting conversation (Lichtman, 2010).

I used the technological devices of an iPad or iPhone, along with a digital voice recorder, to record all of the interviews. Additionally, I jotted down brief notes and shorthand reminders during the interviews so that the sharing sessions would take on a more informal, dialogical approach, rather than the formal approach of an interview. Essentially, I wanted to encourage participants to speak and share with me and not consider a different audience. I also assumed the task of transcribing the interviews along with the assistance of a professional transcriber. Relative to this task, and in order to optimally identify the findings, results, and conclusion of the study, I implemented a close analysis of the transcripts and recordings so that the nuances of language and structure could effectively emerge. This reporting of the interview findings will be portrayed largely in the women's own words through "a loose oral narrative and summarizing what the women said" (Reissman, 1993, p. 12).

Interviews began February 2015, immediately following IRB approval, and continued through June 2015, for a total of four months. The transcribing and editing of transcripts took place within two to three weeks following each interview, facilitating the accuracy of memory for the participants and myself.

Coding

As a precursor to data analysis, coding is of utmost importance. "The excellence of the research [study] rests in large part on the excellence of the coding" (Strauss, 1987, p. 27). Codes "represent the decisive link between the original 'raw data,' that is, the textual material such as interview transcripts or field notes, on the one hand and the researcher's theoretical concepts on the other" (Seidel & Kelle, 1995, p. 52). Coding

provides the context and data organization for analysis. "Coding is only the initial step toward an even more rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation for a [study]. Coding is not just labeling, it is *linking*" (Saldana, 2009, p. 8).

I implemented coding procedures as I collected and formatted data to ensure that the ideas and observations from the interviews were accurately depicted. Again, while interviewing, I also recorded analytic memos (written or oral notes about the data to ourselves) to ensure that my memory was not a determinant for coding or data analysis. Once the transcripts were available in hard copy, I looked for patterns within and across texts. Saldana (2009) suggested coding one participant's data at a time, and then moving on to the next participant. Based on this coding procedure, after each participant's data had been initially coded, I implemented a recoding process so that more in-depth patterns and/or themes would become evident (Saldana, 2009).

In order to allow the voices of the participants to speak for themselves, I used what Tesch (1990) described as "de-contextualization" and "re-contextualization" (p. 115), which includes dividing the interviews into meaningful sections—small enough to use but large enough to include context, and then utilized within themes or concepts (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). For this study, I divided interview transcripts after carefully reading them and using the *in vivo* codes which are terms and language derived from the actual participant's interviews. This was done to ensure that the participants' voices remained the focal point of the study. In order to check my coding and analysis, I adhered to the recommendations provided by Ezzy (2013):

1. check interpretations with the participants;

2. transcribe, read, and code early data; and

3. maintain a journal and reflective writing memos. (pp. 68–74)

Data analysis is perhaps the most important stage of the research study process because it is the vehicle that scholars use to share their findings. With the analytic lens of Black Feminist Thought, the analysis of this study is and continues to be empowering for the participants and anyone else who reads it, particularly other Black Women. The experts/participants have exercised and shared their collective and individual voices with the world, thus liberating themselves and breaking down barriers for others.

Data Analysis

This study's interview and data analysis processes were designed to privilege the lived experiences of its black women participants, thereby remaining within the epistemology of Black Feminist Thought. After completion of all interviews transcription tasks, and coding, analysis of the data focused on participants' experiences, their individual interpretations of their experiences, and how those experiences could be understood as either shared or unique among the participants. Coding produced 297 codes for non-superintendents and 322 codes for superintendents. Codes were listed and condensed into 67 categories for non-superintendents and 53 categories for superintendents. The categories were used to identify preliminary themes and then condensed and paired with those themes. Themes were then combined based on similarities from nine (non-superintendents) and eight (superintendents) to four major themes that emerged in both groups of participants (see Appendix C). Due to the amount

of data collected, findings are shared in two chapters: District Leaders and District

Superintendents. Themes were determined based on research questions and the

overlapping categories amongst both groups to produce five themes, listed below in the

table with corresponding sub-themes.

Table 1

District Leaders' and Superintendents' Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Sub-Themes
District Leaders	
Route	Shoulder Tap Factors Affecting the Appeal of Superintendency
Politics	Community Fit Board Politics Diplomacy as a strategy
Barriers to Success	Barriers as Strengths Requirement to Be the Best Flexibility
Support Systems	Professional Support Systems Personal Support Systems
District Superintendents	
Route	Shoulder Tap Timing Factors Affecting the Appeal of Superintendency
Politics	Contracts School Board Advocacy
Barriers to Success	Stereotypes Gender and Race Requirement to Be the Best Family Lack of Professional Networks
Support Systems	Professional Support Systems Personal Support Systems

Conclusion

Research studies take multiple forms and present a multitude of findings. The use of the qualitative interview study as my chosen methodology allowed for the study to be led by the seeking of knowledge, further fostering a creative representation that holds true for the participants over a more widely used interpretive paradigm. This research process pulled from the best of several paradigms and conceptual frameworks in order to conduct a particularly meaningful and impactful study. Black Feminist Thought was the obvious choice due to the focus remaining on the experiences and voices of Black Women for the edification and continued development of Black Women.

Black Feminist Thought empowers Black Women and considers them to be the experts of their experiences. As a Black Woman, I am an insider while I am an outsider as a researcher and non-district level executive. This positionality allowed for reciprocal learning and sharing of experiences, especially throughout the interview process. Consequently, and with the participants positioned as experts, the most logical choice of method was the interview, ensuring that the voices of black female executives/professionals in the realm of education were prioritized over other data. I submit that this is a topic of growing interest, helped by a unique methodology that has greatly shaped the outcome of this study. The following two chapters contain a presentation of data that is presented through the words of the participants, in line with Black Feminist Thought.

CHAPTER IV

IMPLEMENTING THE STUDY: SCHOOL DISTRICT LEVEL LEADER (NON-SUPERINTENDENT) PARTICIPANTS, INTERVIEWS, AND FINDINGS

The non-superintendent school district leaders consisted of seven African American females. All participants were asked fourteen open-ended questions. Within the experiences of district level leaders, four themes presented themselves from the participants' words. The themes were:

1. the experiences that marked the route of the African American school district leaders to district level leadership,

2. the politics in which they engaged in their careers,

3. the barriers to success that they experienced, and

4. the support systems that allowed them to persevere the obstacles and barriers that they encountered so that they were able to actualize their professional goals.

The non-superintendent district leaders shared similarities and differences that impacted their career choices. All district leaders held doctoral degrees and superintendent licensure and all had experience as a principal. Differences amongst the leaders included one's desire for the superintendency, marital status, level of principal experience, age of children, and avenue for advancement through administrative ranks (recruitment, moved for opportunity, or whether they were home grown; see Table 2).

Table 2

District Leader Characteristics

Name	Desire for Superintendency	Marital Status	Principal Level	School-age kids	Recruited, Moved to seek position, or Home grown
Evaluator	Undecided	Married	High School	No kids	Recruited
Balancer	No longer interested	Divorced	Middle School	Yes	Moved
Counselor	No	Single	Elementary	No kids	Home Grown
Learner	Yes	Single	Elementary	Adult kids	Moved
Crusader	Yes	Married	High School	Adult kids	Recruited
Supporter	Undecided	Married	All levels	Adult kids	Home Grown
Floater	Undecided	Married	Elementary	No kids	Moved

Theme One: School District Leaders' Route to District Level Leadership

Within the experiences that marked the route of the African American female school district leaders into district level leadership, the women shared experiences with significantly impacting shoulder taps and a variety of other factors affecting their route to leadership. The factors affecting their route included their desire of lack of desire for the superintendency and their preparation for success within district level leadership.

The Shoulder Tap

The route to education administration began for most participants with a "shoulder tap" or the deliberate suggestion and assistance provided to the individual in order to ascend to a higher position, also known as a sponsorship, which involves a higher ranking individual making deliberate moves to impact the career ascension of a

potential protégé. This is a major step in career development that regularly involves a

mentor or sponsor and can lead to lasting professional guidance and support. Shoulder

taps were so common in the career paths of the participants that it appeared to be a major

determinant in their early progress as leaders. The Evaluator had several shoulder taps in

her career leading her to move to different states, different fields, and different

promotions/positions. She attributed her philosophy about career advancement to a

"higher calling" and acknowledged several different individuals who "tapped" her to take

new positions. The Evaluator explained,

> I never really think about my next job. I've never had to, which I guess is
> working for me now that I'm 50. I never really thought about my next job, and
> I've just tried to really be good at my current job. Never thought about when I
> was an AP, didn't—when I was doing my internship as an AP, I didn't think
> about becoming an AP until [school district] called me to say "Hey, you want to
> come back?" I said, "Sure, I'll come back." [I] didn't think about becoming a
> principal, didn't even apply until [the superintendent] called and said, "Hey, time
> you be[come] a principal." Same thing about going to [another city in a different
> state) or coming here [to current city and position]. [Superintendent] called me,
> or going to [corporate company]. I've never really plotted about my next steps.

Like the Evaluator, the Crusader was also recruited to move and take a position.

> I was sitting in my office one day as an assistant principal, and I got this strange
> message on my phone at work. And it was [from a superintendent who said I] got
> your name from your former superintendent and your former assistant
> superintendent, who I ran into at a conference, and they told me you are the
> person I needed to turn this high school around in [my district].

In line with the power of the "shoulder tap," several other district leaders

mentioned this strategy as the moving force behind their entry into administration or for

seeking a promotion within administration as facilitated by a supervisor familiar with

their work. To further the impact of the shoulder tap, several district leaders shared that

the shoulder tap planted the seed of future possibilities that they themselves had not yet

considered that included becoming an educational leader. The Floater shared her

experience of being tapped by a black female supervisor.

> I did have a black female supervisor who was my principal, who pushed me to go
> back to being an assistant principal, and who opened the door for me to become a
> principal. Some other people didn't know how to open that (professional
> opportunity) door or go through the door. Mine was opened for me, but it was by
> a black supervisor; after [that] I started getting my mind right.

The Balancer shared a shoulder tap experience that included becoming an interim

assistant principal.

> When I first started teaching, I had no aspirations of being a superintendent.
> Didn't even think about being a principal. It was a principal when I was teaching,
> that actually tapped me and said you would make a great assistant principal. So
> when he tapped me and said I want you to be an assistant principal, [which
> occurred] within the timeframe of an assistant principal retiring, he put me in [to
> the position of assistant principal].

As another experience of shoulder tapping, the Counselor was named as an interim

principal before she was licensed, and this move up sparked her interest in school

administration.

> The superintendent thought pretty highly of me, to the tune of actually inviting me
> or insisting that I take over and cover for a principal who had been in an accident
> at one of my elementary schools where I was counselor for a period of about a
> month. He put me in that role to serve as principal, which was kind of interesting.
> I would say that sort of a bug bit me at that point, and my superintendent at the
> time was a very encouraging gentleman, and he said to me, "You know, you're
> good at this, you should really pursue it, you should really consider it." He said,

"You can do this," and that sort of prompted me to start investigating, hmm, wonder what would be involved in that, and I found myself back in school.

The Counselor's tenure as a district leader began in a similar fashion.

(After being principal in elementary schools for eight years), [I] was pulled into the central office to supervise elementary principals. The superintendent says, "Well, you're the person that I see as the one who can work with the team and keep them together as a team."

This assignment led to the Counselor joining a department of education that she now leads, years later. Others regard her as an expert within her department of district leadership, an area in which she originally had no experience.

Okay, so here I am, supervisor in elementary schools, and then the superintendent, a new superintendent at this point, calls me and said, you know, "I like your style, and I need your help. I need you to go into my [educational department] arena." I'm like, "What, I don't know anything about [that department]."

Shoulder tapping, as a key in the route to district level leadership, opened doors and increased access for all participants who received this kind of support and influence. All district leaders, except one, shared an instance of shoulder tapping by a mentor. Mentoring in this way, whether or not the individual's future aspirations included the superintendency, shaped the career paths and choices of these study participants greatly. As shown, some participants were interested in the superintendency and some were not. However, all were fulfilling the roles of direct line positions that could be taken to the superintendency. In addition to the impact of the shoulder tap, there were other factors impacting the route to the superintendency, such as whether or not the superintendency is

desired by the district level leader and their preparation for success at the district level leadership level and into the superintendency.

Factors Impacting the Route to the Superintendency

      Desire for the superintendency. In education, the individual's desire for the pinnacle position of superintendent is traditionally formed by perceptions, drive, and past experiences. The decision to later pursue the position of superintendent will inform career decisions. There were mixed responses regarding the appeal of the superintendency and a desire to seek the position. Due to the political nature of the district level positions held by these women, transparency may not have been shared by all and for understandable reasons. Only two out of the seven district leaders, the Crusader and the Learner, stated that they were definitely interested in the superintendency. The Evaluator stated that she was not seeking a superintendency due to not liking certain aspects of the job (politics mostly), but her silences left room to interpret that the right superintendency could spark her interest. Two leaders, the Balancer and the Counselor, were both sure that they would not seek a superintendency due to the high-stress impact that such a position would likely have on their quality of life. The other leaders were undecided about pursuing the superintendency.

      There are a variety of reasons to seek or not seek the superintendency. Some of the reasons are shared from a few of the participants.

      The Crusader shared her reasons for seeking a superintendency position explaining,

I think that once you get into a school and understand and realize the impact that you have on a school, you wonder if these types of things will work in other schools. And so that's when I decided I wanted to be [a district leader], and so I've been doing that now for four and a half years and [I] now have that aspiration to not just impact a [portion of a district], but an entire school district.

Only one participant, The Floater, was undecided. She shared that her marrying later in life, along with any subsequent decision to have children, would dictate future plans.

The thoughts of [being] an actual superintendent, I have not had those thoughts. I will say now, my age—being a little older is different as far as where I want to go in life. How I want to live the rest of my life—the first part of my life was work, work, work, work, work, and I have not lived.

Three participants shared why the superintendent position might not be appealing to them and others.

The Supporter: When women get into education, the classroom is where they really want to be—impacting the lives of children. So even though many of these classroom teachers probably would be excellent superintendents, I think their comfort level is there.

The Balancer: I no longer have the aspirations (to be a superintendent), and I would say part of that is knowing more closely, not necessarily the role and responsibility, but the wear and tear on you as a person—in terms of your time away from your family, and just the political pieces that go along with being a superintendent. I think that life is too short, and when you look at before and after pictures of superintendents, before and after pictures of presidents . . .

The Counselor: The others of us were convinced that we didn't want to be superintendents. It's—so your life to me, your life is no longer your own, and I just, I just don't want to, I don't care to be in that fish bowl, so that's why I haven't gone beyond. I mean I, I mean I have the superintendency license, but it's just not something I want. That fish bowl is, it's almost like being the president to me. You're in the fish bowl, and there's nothing you can do that's right.

The lack of privacy and the impact on one's life and quality of life is a concern that was shared by The Counselor and The Balancer. Like many of the participants, I too, grappled with whether or not I desired the superintendency despite my professional background mirroring the traditional superintendent route. Starting as a teacher, moving into an assistant principalship, then a high school principalship are common first steps towards being a superintendent. My superintendent certification and my currently working towards finishing my doctoral degree all before the age of 35 all further situate me to move towards the superintendent's seat. However, the desire for quality of life is a shared concern that I have with the participants and the politics and impact on the person is undeniable.

For these women, the superintendency's appeal seemed to be closely tied to the age of the district leader and their willingness to engage in the politics of the superintendency. Despite the qualifications of all of the study participants/leaders, it was clear that most would not be seeking the superintendency. This conclusion is in line with research that spotlights the scarcity of a qualified applicant pool for the superintendency.

Preparation for success. Preparation for success in their current positions, as well as their future plans, varied from participant to participant. However, all participants shared a sense of self-efficacy and believed that they were prepared for whatever future endeavors would arise because of their past professional experiences.

The Evaluator shared that her corporate career greatly impacted her educational career because that experience raised her standards for education.

For [my former corporate employer], if [you are a consumer], everything is that they want the customer to rate them as excellent. None of your bonuses occur within the company unless you're rated as excellent. You don't get a partial bonus for very good, you don't get some bonus for good, you only get a bonus when you're excellent. That just was an epiphany for me. I don't know if we, as educators, have a standard as high as a corporate company, whereas our standards should be even higher for ourselves.

The Learner: I feel like my background has very much prepared me, especially in [my state] to be able to lead the charge for that (district superintendency). I think everything that I have done will prepare me for the superintendency, because when you're running the district everything is touched. You have Special Ed, you have federal programming, which I've had experience in all those areas.

The Floater: It's been naturally the experiences, being exposed to different things, and I know as I'm exposed to different things here in this position, it prepares me for whatever there is in the future.

The Supporter also shared the importance of experience, discussing the number of schools and the diversity of the community she serves. She and The Crusader both explained how responsibility for these and other aspects of school administration have prepared her to possibly lead a school district.

The Supporter: The regional responsibility (Area or Assistant Superintendency) - I know it's awesome, but I enjoy every day of it. I mean, and it has given me a sense that if I desire to go and be my own superintendent, I could do so.

The Crusader: I will say that the most impactful experiences have been those [in my current position, supervising principals] because I have been led by area superintendents who have allowed me to do me, and who have empowered me to be responsible for large projects.

Over the course of their educational careers, the district leaders had in common a depth of professional experiences that prepared them for their current positions as well as for any future aspirations related to ongoing career advancement. The route for all the

district leaders included a progression of position levels, from that of a school building principal (three elementary and four secondary) and leading to a district level position. Further, all held the credential of a completed doctoral degree.

The route of non-superintendent district leaders serves to showcase similarities and differences in the variety of routes taken to reach the district level. It also allows for a comparison and contrast with superintendents, later in the study, to understand if there are correlations between the two groups. In addition to the experiences of the district level leaders within their route to district level leadership, participants also shared their experiences with politics in their careers.

Theme Two: Politics

Within the experiences of the African American female school district leaders with politics, the women shared experiences with appropriate community fit and the impact of personal appearance, school boards and other political players, and with using diplomacy as a political strategy for career success.

Politics is a reality of school district leadership and can make or break a leader's career. One's willingness to engage in politics can be a major factor in deciding if a leader will choose to pursue the superintendency or not. Mentoring and support in the area of politics is greatly needed to assist in the smooth transition from building level positions into the ranks of district leadership. Mentoring can increase resources and prevent derailment.

Community Fit and Appearance

Considering the realm of politics, some of the study participants spoke to the issue

of appropriate community fit as it relates to choosing professional assignments and the

potential of success. Being an African-American female seemed to lend itself more

positively to certain communities, implicating how the importance of appearance factored

into job placements. In this kind of scenario, having an African American female as a

mentor would prove useful. Community fit is doubly important for African American

females who find themselves more readily employed in districts with high minority

populations and high district needs.

> The Crusader: You don't look for any and every superintendency that pops up.
> You have to be very mindful of what your strengths are, and you have to look for
> those districts that suit you. It's not about you walking into a district and making
> it who you are, because you can't do that. You've got to go into a district and
> take your strengths and make a difference in that particular district. All districts
> we can't change, unfortunately, it's just that, sometimes—and some people don't
> want us, African American female as superintendents. So you've got to do your
> homework about districts. You've got to make sure you're picking the right one
> for you. It's not just them picking the right superintendent, it's you picking the
> right one to first initially apply for.

The Balancer also went on to speak about physical appearance differences that are

specific for Black Women but may conflict with a community's view of beauty or

professionalism. This includes various mediums of physical appearance, including

clothing choice, hairstyle, and even skin hue.

> But I do believe that there's some communities are not going to want you to come
> in, so to speak, with your hair in twists. It is what it is, they're not going to want
> it because they don't understand it. I think because we, black women, have so
> many different ways in which we can beautify ourselves that if others don't

understand the beautification, that we see within ourselves, that it's seen as though that we just sort of don't care about ourselves, and so therefore we wouldn't care about the kids that are in that building. We could look a little too ethnic. It's a look that we have to have, and because we are so versatile in the way that we look, I think it's difficult for communities to accept us. We have so many variations in the shades of our skin that even down to the shade of your skin, I think affects whether or not you could be a superintendent.

As indicated by the comments above, some of the participants spotlighted appearance and the need to be mindful of one's appearance as a major factor when addressing the expectations of the public and the impact of those expectations on their success as district leaders and, maybe, future superintendents.

The need to recognize one's connection (or not) to a particular community and to the educational and administrative culture of the district in which one would potentially work, referred to here as district fit, was an opinion shared by most of the district level leaders. This discussion related to the desires and needs of a given community based on its demographics and the cultural dynamics within said community. From both theoretical and practical perspectives, the cultural diversity of the community affects the school board's diversity in terms of representation and points of view, regarded by the majority of the leaders as the factors having the most impact on a superintendent being hired. The leaders specifically explored their conceptions of fit in relation to gender preference, racial preference, skin hue, hairstyle acceptance, and communication style of the potential district leader or superintendent. They further shared their opinions in relation to their current and previous professional responsibilities, but even more in relation to future possibilities concerning which communities would be a good fit for a superintendency. Mostly the school board communicates the community's needs and

other political parties involved in the local politics of an area. The politics is a reality of

district level leadership but not often an area that leaders enjoy.

School Boards and Other Political Players

Feelings regarding the politics of the superintendent position mostly revolved

around the school board politics, which can prove difficult to navigate. Some

participants shared political strategies that included knowing oneself and remaining

transparent with stakeholders, analyzing the motives of others, and avoiding the

superintendency because of the potentially negative impact on one's quality of life.

> The Supporter: You have to kind of take things, analyze the players—just like the school board. You [have to] analyze those players and see where they come from, and that helps you be able to process and navigate things, and so then sometimes things are not as difficult for you. Even at your district level, you [have] to process and really think through, "Now, what's in it for them and what's in it for me?"

> The Crusader: It would be an expectation of myself that I share with a board what my true passion is so that they understand.

> The Evaluator: Understand yourself as a leader pretty clearly—what you will and won't do and what leads and guides you, what are your principles as a leader, because I think it'll get tested as you go up. You have to feel comfortable, so know yourself and feel comfortable with yourself. I would also say understand the nature of politics. For every level higher involves more and more of the understanding of politics, and that job is the ultimate part of it. My job is, a large piece of it is politics, but not nearly that much where it's all politics, so I think you have to understand politics, and you have to be comfortable with it. Most superintendents that I know that are successful are very, very great politicians.

Dealing with board politics is one of the primary tasks of a superintendent. On

this point, the district leaders addressed the topic of politics with the collective

understanding that they had not experienced the kind of political involvement that

surrounds the position of superintendent. At the same time, the leaders expressed individual views of politics that varied greatly among them.

The Supporter spoke of hesitancy and a reluctant acceptance that came with the experience of her increasing responsibilities as a district leader. The Crusader, intent on preserving her own beliefs and standards, shared her determination to remain transparent in her dealings with the board prior to accepting a superintendency. She seemed quite aware that her style would likely be perceived as more of an acquired taste and wanted to be true to herself in her search of her ultimate, professional challenge. Overall, the district leaders shared a sort of contempt for board politics, and this particular issue seemed to be a major deterrent in seeking the superintendency. One participant even compared the stress of political involvement to the before and after pictures of the nation's presidents. While four and eight year spans of time does not typically warrant a visible aging of a person's appearance, the country's presidents typically age dramatically within their one or two terms in office. In the same way, the wear and tear on superintendents, including the dramatic physical signs of aging, seemed to be due to the politicking with various constituencies that all seemed to have competing priorities.

Overall, the need to preserve oneself appeared to be a major concern for the district leaders, something that seemed quite difficult to do in the superintendency. As such, several district leaders admitted that they lacked the desire to live in the "fish bowl" any more than they were already accustomed to doing. I had to admit that I also shared the concern of whether my true self would also be lost in a position that seemed to be moving more towards politics and away from the nuts and bolts of education. Diplomacy

is a strategy that can preserve one's professional standing while still maintaining one's

integrity.

Diplomacy as a Political Strategy

As a strategy for dealing with the unavoidable political nature of the

superintendent position (as well as other executive level, district positions), district

leaders cited diplomacy as another method or approach for achieving greater success.

> The Counselor: Learn the nuances, learn "when to and when not to." Getting ahead is a maneuverable thing. The bull in the china shop's not always going to make it there.
>
> The Learner: You have to know how to play the political game. You can't always say what you want to say, you might think it, but don't spit it out [of] your mouth. Anger today may not cost you your job, but it definitely can cost you promotions down the road, and you don't even realize that somebody's hanging on to some anger you displayed five years ago. So you have to be very cognizant about who you're talking to, you don't want to not be you, but if you is somebody who gets angry all the time anyway, you might not be in the right profession.
>
> The Supporter: Sometimes people don't want to go through all the political stuff, all of the hobnob and networking that you have to do because I will tell you for me, that was my stretch. Even now sometimes, when I go to a meeting, I may come like five minutes before the meeting starts so I won't have to get it (networking).

While politics were a reality that most district leaders did not enjoy, it proved to

be only one of the realities of being an African American female leader within a school

district. District leaders also shared factors in choosing a community to serve based on a

leader's leadership vision, strategies for using diplomacy, and interacting with school

boards. In the following section, the district leaders shared their experiences with

barriers to their success and how those barriers affected them professionally and personally.

Theme Three: Barriers to Success

In addition to managing politics, barriers to success regularly shaped the role and experiences of African American female district leaders. Within the experiences of the African American female school district leaders with barriers to success, the women shared experiences with barriers that were specific to black women, the need to be the best, lack of flexibility for professional marketability, and lack of professional supports through mentoring and networking.

Obstacles to success, referred to here as barriers, were a constant theme in the interviews, with most participants mentioning situations in which they were confronted with barriers they had to overcome in order to move up professionally. Once barriers are brought to light, it is easier to overcome them and surpass expectations. In this case, the ability to face and overcome barriers would indicate the individual's potential to achieve a successful career leading school districts.

Barriers as Strengths for Black Women

The Crusader spoke profoundly about the dichotomy of barriers in that certain barriers are also strengths for African American women. Her recognition of this seeming conflict was a celebration of African American women and African American female leaders alike.

> Strong African American women, we have gotten where we are in whatever positions we are in, because we've been true to our mission and we're passionate about what we do. And I think some people who are in positions to make you a

superintendent don't appreciate that sense of openness and honesty. And so people see us as the "b" word. If there was someone else doing the same thing, they wouldn't be seen that way, but we're strong. I think African American women, in general, are just strong willed and strong natured. Some people don't understand one, that sense of passion and that sense of urgency that we have, and that sense of—that honesty and transparency that we have. I think my will and my passion can be intimidating to some people.

Need to be the Best

The need to be the best, along with the constant push for African American females and leaders to go above and beyond to overcome racism and sexism, was a constant motif throughout the study, with participants echoing this concern within and across their interviews.

> The Supporter: I think that in these roles we have to be better than our white counterparts. We have to be professional in our dress, we have to be professional in our communications, [and] we (black female school leaders) have to make sure that we stay current with the research that is out here around students and teaching and learning.

Similarly, the Floater discussed the difficulty attendant to managing the professional drive of the African America female leader and the stigma that can accompany it.

> I think just being a black female and being young on top of that, we feel like we have to be tough because we feel like sometimes we have to prove this point that we can do this job whether we're young and not as experienced as the next person. You have to work harder to show your position and not position as in title, but your position as in I can do this, I am doing this, I can hold mine, [while] also trying to find that balance among teammates and coworkers of not being that bitch.

More than the others in this study group, the Evaluator spoke about the competitive drive

that must be present in the individual in order to overcome the obstacles that can prevent

black women from succeeding.

> I do think that people just become surprised that you are smart, or you can hold your own, that you are a black woman, especially [when] they think you're young. You have to really prove yourselves, you don't come with any kind of status whereas I think white men automatically get extra credit, so they just be by being white, they get bumped to the line, head of the line because you're a white man, and [it is assumed that] you probably can do whereas as a woman, we always have to prove ourselves. I think that we [as black women] are more conscious. We're more conscious about how we look, how we dress, how we speak, how we present ourselves—because there's no extra credit for us, we're not graded on a curve, ever.
>
> As a black woman I think that you need to be seen as an amazing person, and then you're plucked out the crowd. You just can't be the same as everyone else—people need to know that you're excellent, and your work stands and shows that you're excellent. If not, you're just a part of the bunch, [and] then that racial bias or that gender bias will have us to be chosen last, because you're just one of them and typically the man, the white man gets chosen if you're one of them.

The Learner shared a similar sentiment, demonstrating her agreement with the other

participants that black women—either seeking or already working in educational

leadership positions—feel compelled to be the best at what they do.

> We (black women) have to work twice as hard and be twice as smart. For an African American female, you have to be able to not just say you can do something, you have to be able to show it through background, experience, work history, and committees you've sat on.

The absence of a "curve" or privilege is an embedded barrier for those individuals

who do not fit the white, male paradigm in educational leadership. Beyond this fact,

being an African American who is also a woman comes with its own set of obstacles,

thus representing the double whammy upon which Black Feminist Thought is predicated. In their interviews, each district leader shared an experience that she internalized as a lasting reality because of its discriminatory basis and its long-term, negative effect. As such, each participant spoke of discrimination as a reality and expectation; and thus, something to simply deal with and overcome anytime it arises.

From birth, the need to overcompensate for being born African American and female has been drilled into the African American female's psyche. We are taught that we will never be given anything because we have to earn and take everything that we desire. At the same time, there is a contradiction at play between mainstream society's expectations of black women versus their actual abilities. For instance, the district leaders talked about subtle forms of discrimination regarding low expectations of their professional performances; and yet, with that, the requirement to be over-qualified in order to be considered as viable candidates for professional positions. This reality is a weight that all African American females share alike.

The Crusader spoke of the race/gender barrier as a badge of honor, a difference to be celebrated. She explained that attributes often described negatively, such as blunt speech, can also be interpreted as honesty and transparency. While people are sometimes intimidated by these attributes, I am suggesting that they would be celebrated in others who are not African American females. Further, people should understand that the passion and drive that lead high-achieving, black women to their professional success are the same traits that are needed to lead districts. The Crusader made a poignant point, attesting to the fact that we, African American females, are celebrated and feared for the

same actions and traits that make us qualified to lead districts ~~to~~ toward meaningful

change. Would a man with the same characteristics be ridiculed or celebrated?

Flexibility

These district leaders/study participants spoke consistently about the impact of

supportive relationships, or lack thereof, on career attainment. Only one of the district

leaders had school-age children, a reality that is reflected in their respective accounts of

flexibility and mobility as issues that influence their professional advancement, both

positively and negatively. Specifically, while family, spouses, and children were

emotional support systems for district leaders, they could also serve as major factors

affecting the women's flexibility and mobility for promotions. In addition to managing

barriers to success that include differing forms of oppression, a lack of flexibility for

professional marketability due to parenthood responsibilities and a lack of mobility also

presented themselves as barriers to success for the District Leaders.

Parenthood. The Balancer was the only district leader with a school-age child,

and she spoke about the lack of consideration concerning how work demands can conflict

with childrearing. For instance, school board meetings often take place in the evenings

and run late into the night. This can present a problem for parents, especially single

parents like her. She was able to balance and maintain her lifestyle choice for herself and

her daughter with the help of a dependable sitter, pre-arranged meals for the week

prepared during the weekend, and the support of a social group centered around the

children of successful African American families.

For a single person [in an] upper level position, you have to have a good support system and support network. I have people that—I have different ones, [who help with my child]. We (black women) are not necessarily expected to be the breadwinner of a family, but we are expected to be the mother, if you have children. And so that, in itself, is a fulltime job—whether you do it right or wrong.

Representing another point of view regarding the demands of children and careers, those district leaders who are wives and mothers shared that waiting until their children were older made it easier for them to advance their careers because older children can handle greater independence and responsibility, thereby reducing the household duties that would fall to mothers of younger children. This was articulated by The Supporter as well.

But it really does impact your family; you have to be careful, especially when you start having children that you give your kids equal time [as your career].

The Counselor and the Floater, however, shared opposite experiences in which their careers took precedence over family considerations. The Counselor shared that she had never married. The Floater addressed the fact that earlier in her life, she focused on obtaining the necessary credentials and degrees to further her career. They each explained that their careers had influenced the course of their romantic and family lives more than the reverse.

My career affected marriage, I'll say it that way. Living the job has impacted things that I should have done in my life, I think. By immersing myself in the job and allowing the job to kind of take over, I think I passed up on things, like marriage and kids.

During her interview, the Floater seemed to be reflecting and sharing simultaneously on the topic of career versus family.

> I will say, being a little older is different, as far as where I want to go in life. I want to live the rest of my life because the first part of my life was work, work, work, work, work, and I have not lived. Even this position dictates if I have a child or not, and that's sad but it's real.

Mobility. Previously introduced research shows that mobility is more of a limiting factor in career advancement for women than men. This dissertation study shares the same findings. For example, the Crusader described an impending divorce and her career advancement occurring at the same time as a convenience.

> The Crusader: [At the time that] my husband and I were separating, I said this is a prime time to relocate.

Other study participants spoke of conscious decisions they made to not move, regardless of career advancement. The Balancer and the Supporter shared similar thoughts in terms of prioritizing family over moving, while the Floater expressed the realization that while she had prioritized her career at first, she was now beginning to want a change in priorities.

> The Balancer: You do have to be ready to move, and ready to move your family, and I'm just not ready to do that.
>
> The Supporter: As a superintendent you move around a lot. Having that flexibility to move, if you have a family, would be a challenge for a lot of people I think.
>
> The Floater: Marriage or family relationships have not affected my career; my career has affected my marriage and my family relationships. Being far away

[from family and friends] is worse, now that I am getting older. I'd rather be with friends and family, but I want a balance of that. If I was in this position at home, it might be a little bit better, but it's tougher being far away from home.

The flexibility of mobility is a factor that is often considered a given in the superintendency search. Of the district leaders, only the Counselor and the Supporter had not moved for a professional opportunity. The Balancer had previously moved for a professional opportunity but was no longer willing to move and uproot her child due to now being a single mother. The Evaluator lived separately from her husband for years at a time, and this arrangement worked successfully for their marriage and careers. She has moved for promotions in the past and made it clear that she would move again. The Learner was in a committed, long-term, romantic relationship and revealed that her partner was open to moving in order to be with her wherever she decided to accept a position. The Crusader accepted and moved for her first principalship immediately following a marriage separation. She noted that her current husband is extremely supportive and mobile.

Throughout the interviews, the discussion of mobility always involved kids, if applicable, and spouses. This shows that despite the power, prestige, and financial rewards of the positions held by these district leaders, they were often prioritizing their personal lives above professional attainment. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the individual leader's choice of significant other may have been affected by the flexibility and support offered by her potential partner.

Participants shared barriers to success and they shared an awareness of how others perceived African American females. The barriers included recognizing the juxtaposition

of African American women's traits as barriers and areas of strength, the need to be the

best to remain competitive and a lack of flexibility due to family responsibilities. While

barriers to the professional success of the District Leaders appeared to be plentiful, they

proved to pale in comparison with the success that could be achieved through the

professional and persona support systems that enabled the District Leaders to overcome.

Theme Four: Support Systems

Within the experiences of the African American female school district leaders

into district level leadership, the women shared experiences with professional and

personal support systems that catapulted them to success.

Professional Support Systems

Professional support systems proved to be invaluable to the success of the African

American District Leaders. The professional support systems consisted mostly of

networks and mentoring and each contributed to the career path in different but

significant ways.

Networks. Some of the participants shared their thoughts about competition and

the loneliness that comes with the responsibility of leading a school district. The

opportunity-to have someone with whom to share ideas and build bonds of trust was a

common concern among the leaders. Support from colleagues or "battle buddies" can

increase comfortability and confidence in one's decision. The absence of those "battle

buddies" can create a sense that the obstacles encountered are singular and not a trend.

The Crusader and The Evaluator shared how difficult networking can prove to be for

Black women leading school districts.

The Crusader: There are three other folks in the district who do what I do, and that group—they're all looking to move up and there are not enough seats at the top. So you're still lonely because you're not quite sure who to trust. The further up you go, the lonelier it does get.

The Evaluator: Usually the higher you go, the fewer there are of you (black women). When you're a principal, there are a lot (of black women). In central office, there were a few other central office women. There was one other black woman who was in charge of Title I, and then [when I went to Corporate], there were a few of us, but as you go higher there are fewer, less and less.

Networking is a key skill in career development because it can increase skill sets and provide connections to opportunities and people. Some participants mentioned a lack of current available mentors, but credited colleagues with assisting in their professional development by often acting as sounding boards.

The Supporter: I have had some good colleagues for whom I have a lot of respect. You talking about pushing, one of my [colleagues/friends] was that person pushing me, "Girl, go and finish this paper, you know you have all that work over there. Girl, you better get it done." She really helped me.

The Counselor: A retired friend/colleague . . . she worked here, and I was her supervisor at one time, but I look to her a lot now as sort of a mentor; and if I have a question about something, I can reach out to her and get that perspective on things. I find myself calling and asking, "Am I crazy or what? Can you believe that this is what these crazy clowns are doing?" She knows the school system and I know that she'll be confidential. My predecessor is another person that I pull on from time to time. She and I will get together, you know, at least once a month maybe and have lunch and you know. They are very much sounding boards.

Networking is another resource for professional growth and, yet, not all of the district leaders participated in professional networks, formal or informal. However, two of the district leaders, the Supporter and the Counselor, both spoke of extensive professional networks that supplanted mentoring, at times, for them. They shared that

these networks pushed them to finish assignments and degrees, as well as acted as sounding boards through which they could discuss professional dilemmas and/or vent their frustrations. These women seemed the most comfortable and satisfied with their professional lives. This leads me to believe that the opportunity to have a tried and true group of individuals who can be trusted to listen to venting and share in celebrations— while practicing non-disclosure and offering open and honest advice, personally and professionally—has a beneficial impact on the quality of life of the individual who holds such a high impact and politicized position as district leader.

Mentors. Previously shared research shows that mentoring is one of the most important factors in determining whether one will be able to obtain a superintendency as well as in the individual's overall success professionally. Participants named a number of mentors throughout their lives and careers. For example, while supervisors are frequently evaluators, they can also serve as mentors for those seeking advancement. In addition to networking, mentoring proved to be pivotal to the career progression of the District Leaders. Mentoring was experiences through supervisors, informal mentors, family members, and even through the mutually beneficial act of mentoring others.

Supervisors as mentors.

> The Crusader: [One of] my former superintendents in a previous district [was a] phenomenal man, phenomenal man. I would say [my supervisor when I became a high school principal] was there for me as a principal, and he—I'm not sure that I would consider it a mentor, but he was a very strong advocate and allowed me the opportunity and the space to do what was needed to transform [that high school]. I've seen both of my area superintendents in a mentoring capacity because whenever I needed advice, I knew that I could get very honest advice from both of them.

The Supporter: [The] assistant superintendent apparently saw something in me and she's retired now. She said, "I want you to be a part of this leadership program [that traveled and learned about the legislation process and schooling]." I think, for me, that [experience] was the real beginning because I had an opportunity.

The Counselor: [While a high school assistant principal], the principal at the time said to me, "There's some openings for principalships," and [since I had only been there for approximately 6 months], I said, "I'm not ready for a principalship." [He] said, "Well interview anyway, just for the practice of interviewing."

At the time, the Counselor's principal had already recommended her for a principalship, and this led to her first appointment as a principal. She went on to share an experience about a second supervisor who served as a mentor for her.

The Floater: I did have a black female supervisor, who was my principal, who pushed me to go back [to grad to become] an assistant principal, and who opened the door for me to become a principal. After I became an assistant principal, she moved up to become an area superintendent, [and she opened the door for me to get my first principalship].

The Evaluator: I always say that she [my principal when I was a teacher] taught me the initial things about standards and expectations because hers were very high. I learned all my nice stuff from a male supervisor [who supervised me as a principal]. He taught me to have heart, [my female principal] didn't really have any heart, and so the heart piece that ever comes out of me is probably from [my male supervisor] because he had a tremendous amount of heart.

I think [my former] chief academic officer [who] later became superintendent taught me about standards in the school system because [she] was always the bad cop, and so she taught me how to have those same standards for an entire organization. [She also taught me] to be decisive as a woman in a field where women are looked at differently the higher [up] you go.

Mentoring was a mainstay throughout the interviews. The district leaders seemed to have experienced mentoring by a supervisor in relation to their prior career promotions, and it

usually involved a shoulder tap or a sponsorship. Supervisors seemed to have the most

profound impact on promotions because of their obvious position of power in relation to

the participants. Despite the positive effects of the mentor's efforts on their behalf, most

district leaders did not mention long-lasting mentorships that continued throughout their

careers.

     Informal mentors. Informal mentors are mentors who are not formally affiliated

with someone or through a professional organization. They may be role models who

serve as a reminder of what is possible. They may be sought out by an aspiring mentee,

or they may choose to seek out the mentee themselves. Such unlikely mentors proved to

have had a profound impact on the careers of the district leaders.

> The Balancer: There was one (former superintendent) that used to be from [my hometown], and she was an African American [female] superintendent and a family friend, and so I thought if she can do it, then I can do it and I can talk to her. Sometimes you can have mentors that don't know that they're mentors.
>
> The Counselor: Probably the real encourager in the principalship, in that first principalship, there was a gentleman who had been a principal many, many years ago, and as he would say, he was a community person. He [one day visited my school at the beginning of my principalship and during our conversation] said, "Well, I have decided that you're my project." [He told me], "You'll be seeing a lot of me and when I see you, just talk to me and let me [know] how you're doing, tell me how you're feeling." A month to the day he came back, and he came every month, one day out of every month he stopped in just to check on me.

After the superintendent informed the Counselor that she was being moved to a different

school at the conclusion on the school year, she returned to her then current school to

conclude the year with the fifth grade recognition program. While speaking she became

emotional, and just as her emotions began to show, her mentor showed up.

The Counselor: I kind of lose it, I'm like okay, this is not going to work, I'm going to start crying here, and I look out the corner of my eye and I see somebody. It's [my mentor/friend], he comes walking over beside me, put his arm around me, said, "You can do this, you can do this." I [then] take a deep breath, and I finished, and I tell my kids how much I love them and that I going to miss them, but I won't be there another year, but that I'll come back and check on them. That was like the last time I actually saw him, but for three years he was there. He just did it out of the goodness of his heart, [out of] his desire to give back to his community.

The Evaluator: I do try to find mentors to help me in whatever areas I'm the weakest. I have one, who is my mentor in, I don't want to say blackness, I'll say cultural awareness. [This mentor] helps me to understand the expectations that I think the universe has for me based on my culture, so I consider her a mentor in being responsible for what I'm supposed to do for people of color.

Informal/found mentors are those individuals who assist a mentee in matriculating to a desired position, but who may not fit the traditional role of mentor in the sense that they may not be personally or professionally acquainted with the person, or may not be in a position to officially help promote her career. These found mentors have an impact on the desires of the aspiring professional anyway.

The Counselor was blessed to have had a found mentor who appeared and stepped back professionally like the mystical character Bagger Vance. As she began her principalship, a retired principal introduced himself and supported her throughout her years at her first school. He even showed up for the Counselor's emotional moment, during the last assembly of the school year, in which she announced that she was leaving the school for another principalship. She shared that she continued to speak occasionally to the gentleman, but that she never saw him again after that moment in the assembly.

The Balancer spoke of a role model who was an African American female superintendent from her small hometown. The accomplishments of this hometown

celebrity ignited a belief in her that she, too, could one day be a superintendent. She later decided that the position was no longer desirable, but she was aware that if she chose, it could be accomplished.

The Evaluator discussed how she merged the mentoring of her superintendent with the guidance of a community member who served as a cultural mentor, helping the Evaluator learn more about her responsibilities as an African American woman as well as an educator. These found mentors affected the district leaders in non-traditional ways that assisted in their development as professionals and individuals.

Parents and family members as mentors. While not typically included in the widely considered field of mentoring, family members also had an impact on the careers of participants.

> The Balancer: I will tell you that one of my greatest mentors is, was, and still is my ex-husband. He is one of the greatest mentors, even going through in the process of going through the divorce. I was at the same time getting my doctorate, and he said that he was going to do whatever he could to support me to ensure that I finished that degree. Because he was very supportive in helping me to start, to even saying, "This is what you need to do, this is where you're going, this is what you need to do, no, I don't want to get that—you're, yes you do, you're going to get it, and I'm going to help you get it," and so he, I think he would be one, and continues to be a very good mentor.

> And then I probably would say my mom and my dad. Again, they are former educators, and my mom was a teacher and my dad was a principal, my principal. As new positions come along that are higher, there is always my daddy saying, "The decision is yours, but you would be so great." Some of those aspirations is maybe [the] need to do this for my daddy.

> The Learner: My dad, he is the, what I call the collegiate, in charge type [of] person. He was a college professor [and dean of his department]. After he and my mom separated, he remarried and his wife was a special education teacher. My background then ended up being in special education from a love of being in her classroom.

The Balancer and the Learner were both led into education and pushed to further their careers beyond the classroom by parents who were educators. The Balancer addressed the feeling of pride that her father experiences whenever she achieves a promotion, degree, or any other professional accolade. Their father instilled the desire for leadership in the Learner and all of her sisters. Stretching beyond the positive impact of parents and family of origin on one's career attainment, the Balancer credited her ex-husband as being one of the biggest influences on her career success, even through their divorce. He gave her advice and pushed her to finish her doctoral degree so that she would be more marketable and have professional options that only the terminal degree can provide within the field of education.

Mentoring others. The following quote is often shared in the African American community: "To whom much is given, much is required." This is doubly true for African American females, many of whom have directly benefitted from someone personally guiding their careers. The mentoring of others is a great way to cultivate leadership capacity in others, putting into practice one's own leadership philosophy, while also ensuring a qualified workforce to support one's vision. In addition to receiving mentoring from others, District Leaders shared their experiences with mentoring others including other black women and mentoring others to promotions.

Mentoring other Black women. The Crusader spoke to the importance of mentoring African American women specifically. Surprisingly, she was the only participant who spotlighted this emphasis.

The Crusader: I think that once we get there, or when you're there, I think it's incumbent upon us as African American women to bond together, to create a strong network for other African American females, and to help another to get where we are. I just think that's our mission because unfortunately, some of us encounter some things that will keep us, that will block us, or will try to block us from being what we want to be.

Mentoring to promotions. Many of the district leaders mentioned mentoring others to promotions, which is referred to as embedded mentoring. Due to the difficulty frequently experienced by African American women in gaining access to the pipeline that leads to the district level and/or the superintendency, this is badly needed.

The Crusader: My purpose for leading adults is honestly to mentor them to be what it is that they want to be. When I hired my assistant principals, one of my first questions for them was what do you want to do next? And if that was to be a principal, then it was my responsibility to make sure that I mentored them to become principals.

The Supporter: I try to be very, very intentional. Sometimes people call and want to come by, want to talk to me, want me to help them get a job, and so I really go out of my way to try to do that. I think that giving back is critical. There's several teachers that are in positions, assistant principals that are in positions that I want to think I had something to do with them getting there.

The Evaluator was the one participant who spoke to being more selective in her mentoring choices. She shared that she does not mentor everyone who requests it, but adds a mentoring focus when she chooses to take on the task.

The Evaluator: I think I'm very intentional if I agree to be someone's mentor because I think that you should have someone that mentors you; they want to help you fill the gaps in wherever you exist and help you get to wherever you want to be.

The Counselor was currently in the process of mentoring her successor, since she was

nearing retirement.

> I've tried to work intentionally on one young lady because I know she has lots of
> potential. I hired her here, and I feel like because I brought her aboard, then I owe
> that to her. We were talking just last night, [my protégé] said, "You're going to
> stick around?" So I said, "Uh-uh, you won't be here for four—uh-uh, no way.
> No way. 'Well I'm just worried about who will come in.' I said, "Who will come
> in? You're already here. You are ready, you're as ready as anybody else you can
> name that you think might like to come in here. Now stop saying that you're not
> ready."

With regard to this particular conversation, the Counselor explained that she then went on

to give her potential successor feedback on the areas in which the younger woman needed

to work in order to further be able to "fill her shoes" upon the Counselor's retirement.

Due to her years of experience and service to her district, The Counselor was

considered a mentor to numerous individuals within her district-direct reports and

through her hands-on approach with supervisors.

> The superintendent will tell me that he feels I've mentored him; I recognize that
> he is the superintendent. He said, "Because you're probably one of the people
> that come in and tell me exactly what you think." "Well," I said, "Isn't that what
> you hired me for?"

The district leaders spoke of giving advice or assisting others in achieving positions

and/or promotions.

In addition to benefitting from professional support systems, District Leaders

shared that personal support systems were enabling forces to allow them to continue in

their professional careers.

Personal Support Systems

Personal support systems proved to be instrumental in the emotional health that supported the District Leaders and equally as important as the professional support systems. The personal support systems included inner circles of friends and colleagues as well as familial support through a supportive husband.

Inner circle. The political necessities attendant to dealing with the community and the public, paired with other barriers that accompany the reality of being a Black woman in district level leadership, can often have a profound impact on one's social life and inner circle. Study participants shared that their circles of friends and confidantes were small and primarily centered on supporting the person, as an individual, rather than the position that she held. Some participants stressed an ongoing reliance on inner circles that predated their professional careers.

> The Crusader: [My inner circle is] people who don't care one way or the other about other people. It's about me with this group of folks, it's about what I want to do and they keep me grounded, they ask me the right questions, they give me the right kind of support, they're just there for me, regardless of what I want to do, they're just there for me. So although it's a small group, I could probably count on two hands that small group [who are] not in competition with me. I hear the real, honest, and transparent answers from that group; a lot of them are just like best friends from high school.

> The Balancer: Do I have an inner circle? Yes. That inner circle was either developed in high school or in college . . . I have an inner circle that I worked with prior to coming [here]. I know that that inner circle is more about [me as a person]. And so I [also] have a small circle of my sorority, my line sisters, who are just—it's just about, it's about me—and they don't understand my work, they're not in school, they're not in education. You need that.

The Balancer also explained that she also had a social circle that involved professional women who supported each other in raising their children. The Evaluator, however, preferred a smaller inner circle.

> I don't like being by myself, but I don't like being with a lot [of people], so I think I'm an excited introvert. I have very close friends. I love hanging out with my very best friend, few family members, my brother, one of my half-sisters, so a very small group of people that I like hanging out with.

Friendships and confidantes are often important factors, in terms of supplying moral support and personal understanding, for district leaders who are subject to dealing with the scrutiny of the public eye. These friends and confidantes served as an inner circle that assisted in coping with the politics of the position so that the woman fulfilling the position did not lose her identity. This inner circle was small because politics sometimes proved to be a motivator for friendships. Consequently, The Balancer, the Evaluator, and the Supporter all shared that their closest friends and confidantes were individuals who had established relationships with them prior to their career climbs. They cited this important factor, trustworthy personal relationships, as the key to their ability to maintain emotional transparency and be "themselves." The Evaluator actually distinguished between the roles associated with the person versus the roles associated with the position by signifying her professional self as "Dr. Evaluator." This distinction between personal and professional roles was a common topic of discussion for those who knew her best, namely her husband and close friends.

According to these district leaders, the small or limited number of confidantes within one's inner circle is completely understandable considering the politics that

involve the role of leader; even more so, when the leader is an African American female

in charge of several projects and a supervisor to so many.

      Family: Supportive husbands. In addition to the power of a supportive inner

circle, every married District Leader shared the impact of having an invested supporter in

the form of a husband.

> The Supporter: Having a husband [who is] understanding is really key because you will find out, those late in the night ball games [prevent you from] being able to come home at five o'clock and have meal prepared. You have to have family members that are supportive, and they value you and they let you be you and do the things that you want to do.

Two district leaders shared their thoughts on flexibility as offered by mobile husbands

and on a couple's willingness to live separately for career advancement.

> The Evaluator: When I thought I wanted to be a superintendent back when I was a principal, he (husband) just said he'd move wherever I wanted to go, but then as we started talking about it, he said, "I don't really want to go." I never thought to pressure him to want to go. He's always in my corner, and he'll know that in July here—we won't see each other at all because were trying to start school in August; or if he comes [here] and the whole weekend I have to work, he's fine with it, so he's been very supportive. It's never been a problem for us. But we don't have kids, so it's easier.

> The Crusader (on the positive impact of her supportive and mobile husband)

> My current husband is probably my biggest advocate, my biggest cheerleader. Right now we're considering a position that could take me out of the state, and one that could leave me here in the state, but where we'd have to pick up and relocate.

The impact of professional support systems has been widely documented and this study furthers to support that professional support systems are vital to a successful career of any upward mobile person. It is especially important in the careers of African American Women who encounter barriers to success that others may not. While not discounting the importance of professional supports, the participants were very transparent about the fact that their personal support systems allowing them to maintain their career course and to maintain their sense of self. The successes of the District Leaders were due to various supports, professional and personal alike.

Summary

While there are several similarities between the District Leaders and the Superintendents, included in this study, there are major differences in experiences due to the escalation of responsibility for Superintendents. Chapter IV focused on the participants' experiences who were African American Female District Leaders, whether they desired the superintendency or not. This chapter included their route to district level leadership, the politics encountered, barriers to success that they have experienced, and support systems that have supported them throughout their careers. Chapter V will focus on the participants' experiences who were African American Female District Superintendents who have successfully attained the highest position of authority within a school district.

CHAPTER V

IMPLEMENTING THE STUDY: SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT PARTICIPANTS, INTERVIEWS, AND FINDINGS

Group two consisted of six African American female superintendents. Participants were asked the same questions (see Appendix A) as participants in group one. Within the experiences of superintendents, there were four themes that presented itself from the participants' words. The themes were:

1. the experiences that marked the route of the African American school district leaders to the superintendency,

2. the politics in which they engaged in their careers,

3. the barriers to success that they experienced, and

4. the support systems that allowed them to persevere the obstacles and barriers that they encountered so that they were able to actualize their professional goals.

The superintendents shared similarities and differences that impacted their career choices. All superintendents held doctoral degrees and superintendent licensure, had experience as a principal, and were married. Differences amongst the superintendents included ascension to the superintendency (initiated interest or encouraged to seek), level of principal experience, age of children, approximate years of experience, perceived job

satisfaction, avenue for advancement into superintendency (recruitment, moved for opportunity, or whether they were home grown).

Table 3

Superintendent Participant Demographics

Name	Approx. Years of Experience	Principal Level	School-age kids	Stated job satisfaction	Home grown, Recruited, Moved	Interest Level
Collector	1-2 years	Middle	No kids	Satisfied	Moved	Desired Superintendency
Loner	3-5 years	Elementary	Adult kids	N/A	Home Grown	Did Not Desire Superintendency
Mover	3-5 years	Elementary	Yes	N/A	Recruited	Desired Superintendency
Climber	9+ years	Elementary	Adult kids	Dissatisfied	Home Grown	Did Not Desire Superintendency
Juggler	1-2 years	High School	Yes	Satisfied	Home Grown	Desired Superintendency
Negotiator	9+ years	Elementary	Adult kids	Dissatisfied	Home Grown	Did Not Desire Superintendency

Theme One: Route to the Superintendency

The route of the African American female school superintendents, shares some similarities with the non-superintendent district leaders while also having differences due to the increased responsibilities of the top school district position. The superintendents shared experiences with significantly impacting shoulder taps, timing, and a variety of factors affecting their route to leadership.

The Shoulder Tap

Several of the superintendents shared that someone with whom each was professionally linked identified characteristics that would prove beneficial in education leadership and would help push them further up the ranks. These "shoulder taps" ultimately led to opportunities that changed the courses of their lives forever. Many of the superintendents did not initially desire the superintendency but were led to the position by mentors. Mentors proved quite influential in career decisions and moves made by the superintendents. Without the mentors, many of the superintendents would not have sought out that level of advancement.

> The Loner: The associate superintendent said to me, "I think you could be superintendent and I really think you should go back and get your doctorate." He said, "I think you not only can sit in my seat, but I think you can sit in the superintendent's seat." It [had] never crossed my mind [and before then] I had no desire [to become a superintendent].

> The Mover: It was truly my desire to be a principal. [I] had no aspirations to go to the central office level positions until I started, became a principal, and then [after] having had conversations then with our current superintendent. [He said], "You know you need to go to the next level, you've done what you needed to do here, it's time for you to move into a central office position." I told myself and at that time, I can do that and then the aspiration. Then I became a deputy superintendent and then was encouraged to pursue the superintendency.

> The Climber: My predecessor asked me to come to central office and work in curriculum. [Once in the position], he started talking about, you know, "You need to get your doctorate," and he went as far as to go get me the application. He told me when he retired, he was setting me up to become the next superintendent of the district. He was my mentor, and he has been by me every step of the way, and that's how I got into the superintendency.

> The Negotiator: Every time there was a shift in superintendency, I was pointed out as somebody who was a hard worker, who did their job, and was trying to get them the things the district needed to have done, so the only job I've applied for in this district is the superintendency. Every other job that I've had, someone

tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Come talk to us because we want you to do this." As you're trying to climb, do the job you're in to the best of your ability, and that will be your resume. That will get you into the next job.

The route to the superintendency was of course different for each of the participants. However, there was a similarity in the fact that they each experienced a shoulder tap to lead them to administration and, in some cases, to the actual superintendency. Without the shoulder tap, some of the superintendents would have never moved in that direction. The Mover and the Loner both shared that prior to someone mentioning the superintendency to them, it had never crossed their minds as a position that they desired.

Timing

Timing seemed to be an unlikely but frequent topic of discussion throughout the interviews with superintendents. The impact that the superintendency has on one's quality of life required an alignment with timing and scheduling that made the expectations placed upon the superintendent manageable. Timing, in terms of stages of life and the demands of the position, sometimes related to age, children, or family responsibilities. Some of the superintendent's responses pointed to the short career expectancy of a superintendent due to the "wear and tear" on the person. The issue of timing also explained the lack of appeal, despite the accomplishment, associated with the superintendency. Both The Loner and The Negotiator the importance of the aligning the superintendency with life circumstances and desires.

> The Loner: It takes a lot out of you, it's 24/7. Someone can call you at two in the morning, someone could call you at five, someone call you at eight. Your time and life is not yours anymore, so it has to be the right time in your life when you do it.

> The Negotiator: Timing is everything; they (children) were all grown by the time I became superintendent which made it easier to do.

Factors Impacting the Route to the Superintendency

A central question of mine that led to the origination of this study was, "Why is there such a shortage of African American female superintendents?" I wondered if the shortage was due to a lack of access versus a lack of appeal for the position. In addition to the impact of the shoulder tap and timing, other factors affecting their route included the appeal and attainment of the superintendency, their preparation for success for the superintendency, and the process of choosing the appropriate job as superintendent.

Appeal of the superintendency. If research showed that there are a large number of women who have the credentials for the position, why is there still a shortage? Is the position unappealing or unattainable for African American females? Most of the superintendents shared that they never desired the superintendency. The Loner, for one, shared "I've never really wanted to be the superintendent."

In contrast to the Loner, the Mover shared a more detailed explanation as to why one might not wish to seek the superintendency.

> The Mover: [The superintendency is] attainable through the access that people provide opportunities for people to become principals and central office administrators. It never becomes more appealing, because you have to be willing to take all the hits that come, and so you have to be willing to take the highs and the lows that come with the job.

The Climber framed her explanation for the lack of appeal in the form of a lack of access, which leads to disinterest.

The Climber: It (the superintendency) hasn't been appealing because it's been an all-male world for a long, long time. It was harder for us (women) to break into the circle. Somebody had to nominate me to get in there.

Attainment. Attainment of the superintendency was framed in two different ways. Some of the women explained their current positions as resulting from being chosen from within their school districts or nearby school districts. The Loner, The Climber, and The Negotiator attribute their superintendencies to being prepared and also being located in the district when the vacancy presented itself.

The Loner: If I had not come up through the district, I don't know if they would have done a search and selected me. Someone in your organization must bring you up and must make that a priority—this is what we need in our system.

The Negotiator: I'm the superintendent in the district where I graduated from, so I've been here in the district since I was five. The district made a decision that they didn't [want to] do a national search since I had been there [in the district].

The Climber: In all honesty, when I say timing is everything, if I wasn't prepared, it wouldn't have worked. My superintendent decided he was going to retire, he said, "You're going to be the next superintendent," and so it was like he just pushed me along the way, and the school board was familiar with me, and they worked with me and they didn't question it, I just rolled into it. He retired, and I graduated all within the same weekend. I was superintendent Monday. It was being at the right place at the right time and having the credentials.

In contrast to the preceding comments, both The Mover and the Collector shared that they actively sought out their superintendencies and formally went through the interview process which, in fact, are not located in close proximity to their previous homes. The other superintendents, however, were homegrown and cultivated either within the same district or close by.

Overwhelmingly, each of the experienced superintendents (more than two years'
experience as a superintendent) shared that the position was not very appealing. The
superintendents addressed the impact that it can have on your life and the life of your
family. They also spoke about the politics that permeate the position, sometimes taking
the focus away from children and schools. Only the Juggler and the Collector seemed to
remain interested in the superintendency as a viable professional goal in general and with
specific regard to their current positions as superintendents. At the time of their
interviews, they were both still within the first two years of their first superintendency.
On the other hand, the Negotiator, the Loner, the Climber, and the Mover all stated that it
was time to move on to another district and possibly away from the superintendency
altogether.

Formal preparation. All of the superintendents included in this study held
doctoral degrees. However, some were the products of additional, non-degreed formal
programs designed to prepare superintendents. The Juggler's words expressed the
sentiment of how vital that degree can be to those seeking promotions and the
superintendency, specifically.

> [The superintendent] encouraged me to work on my doctorate. He said it really
> opens doors for you, and you always want to have the credentials that you need
> when you need them.

The Collector shared how she was encouraged to participate in a program that
ultimately led to her working in an urban school district that preceded her becoming a
superintendent.

My supervisor had been through the Broad Superintendent's Academy, which is like an executive training program [for the superintendency]. And he said, "I think you'd be a good candidate for that." I threw myself in there and went through that process. But once you go through that process, you really have to commit to moving into a pretty large urban school district within 18 months of completing the program. One of [the] mentors at that time had just [been named as superintendent in an urban school district]. We were having lunch one day, and she said, "I want to talk to you about something," and she pulls me out to the side and she says, "I would love for you to come and be [one of my district executives]."

The superintendents shared that throughout their careers they were intent on being prepared and having the required credentials for presenting themselves as viable candidates for the superintendency. The Juggler, the Climber, and the Negotiator were all explicitly told to pursue the doctorate as an avenue to the superintendency. Even though the superintendency does not require a doctoral degree, a large number of African American females who are superintendents have one (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). One of the district leaders, the Learner, expressed the understanding that a white male may readily be given an emergency license to fulfill the requirement to be a superintendent, while an African American female would likely not be afforded the same allowance.

In addition to their degreed credentials, the Collector and the Climber were both products of the Broad's Superintendent Preparation program that grooms professionals to lead urban districts within the country. The program is highly competitive and requires that the participant be flexible enough to assume a position in an urban school district. The Climber was a major supporter of formal superintendent preparation programs, whether extended programs like Broad's or a preparatory institute or conference.

Choosing the job. Choosing the location for a superintendency is a deliberate

decision that was strategic, according to most of the superintendents. Choosing the "fit"

for one's superintendency was expressed as a deliberate choice for the Mover and the

Collector. Each spoke about her skill set and the desire to use that skill set in a

community with a particular need or challenge such as socio-economic status.

> The Mover: [I began] looking at the need of the particular district or what value I
> could bring to the district, the skill sets that I had: a strong instructional leader,
> being able to teach if I had to teach, to lead PD if I had to lead PD.

Similar to The Mover, The Collector looked for a district that allowed her to do a specific

type of work.

> I need[ed] to [come] to a place where I [could] bring my skills and really make a
> huge impact. Because a lot of my work had been done in very diverse
> populations, high poverty, I knew that I needed to go to an environment where I
> could be successful with that skill set. So knowing the poverty here, I thought I
> would be a really good fit. This was the only superintendency for which I
> applied.

The Negotiator shared advice about being careful in terms of choosing when and

where to apply for a superintendency and advised to not assume a position that requires

more time commitment than the average superintendency. She cautioned against ruining

one's career for a seemingly impossible challenge just for the opportunity to acquire the

role of superintendent.

> People trying to get superintendencies, male and female, [should] be careful not to
> be so hungry for your first job that you take on an impossible job. Do your
> research. What kind of district is this? What kind of board is it? Is there a
> history that the board is always arguing or undermining the superintendent? What

do the academics look like? Who would be working for you? Do your research about the climate and the environment and the district because some superintendents believe they can come in and do a magic wand sweep, and all the stuff that they see will disappear. You have five to seven years for meaningful change, so if there's so much broken when you get there, it will damage your image and your career before you even get started.

The ability to recognize that options are available is key for an aspiring superintendent; as such, jeopardizing longevity for ready, yet potentially career-derailing vacancies is counterproductive. This seems especially true for African American female superintendents. African American females are often named to the most difficult school districts, with the most compiled and stifling woes, and some have found themselves pushed out for subjective reasons amid mounting opposition (Gewertz, 2006). Change often brings discomfort and grievances and that has proven to be the double-edged sword for some.

In addition to the experiences of the superintendents, participants also shared their experiences with politics in their careers.

Theme Two: Politics

Superintendents are governed and evaluated by a school board they are also charged to lead. This set-up can involve political issues and conflicts that complicate the responsibility of a school district superintendent. Within the experiences of the African American female school district superintendents with politics, the women shared experiences that dealt with school board politics, contract negotiations, and advocacy for one's school community.

School Board Politics

School boards traditionally are the employers and evaluators of district

superintendents. Those dynamics were a major point of conversation and contention

among the study participants.

> The Loner: I think when I think about an African American [superintendent], the
> reason there are so few, it's because of the school boards. It's not because they're
> not qualified or there aren't a lot of people out there, it's because of the board and
> what the community at large wants. I'm sure they don't like seeing me, I
> guarantee you they don't, but I've earned the respect of people and so are they
> tolerating me, probably, but am I doing darn good things.
>
> It's not as political as you think it is, if you have the board behind you per se. I
> don't think all my board like me. I think they respect me and so I can defend
> whatever. At the end of the day, you're a smart person and you can go and find
> another job anywhere. That's how I look at it, and I'm at the point in my career
> where I can work if I want.
>
> The Collector: The thing about being a superintendent is very often school boards
> see themselves not just getting you, but getting the package.
>
> I did a lot of research on the school board beforehand. I think that was important
> for me to kind of gauge where they were with diversity. If you're a person of
> color, you really should. If you do not do that and you're a person of color, that's
> like pretending. I think there are just things you have to do sometimes when
> you're a woman or a person of color that maybe others would never think about.

The Climber, a super star superintendent, according to the news and other

superintendents, is clearly no longer satisfied with the politics of her current position and

made it clear that she was on her way out.

> I take them (school board members) through training, a lot of professional
> development from every entity. Everybody that works here has to go through a
> lot of professional development, and that has been my savior. Even though they
> (school board members) want to do wrong to me, there's a thin line, they just
> can't cross it without me saying, you know, with all due respect, this is wrong.

Now you can make a choice to do wrong, but here's the right way that it should be done. I use statute, I use code of ethics, I use everything to say this is wrong and when it's wrong, I'm outraged. I let them know that I don't tolerate a lot of foolishness.

This was the worst school year for me because my passion has just gone out the window because I had to fight a battle with the community. I'm looking at my next chapter, and it may be me moving to another district as superintendent if that works, or it may be me coming out and being a consultant and filling in, interim somewhere. I just need a change because I feel that I'm not appreciated anymore. Have you ever heard the saying, "What have you done for me today?"

The Negotiator was one of the superintendents who anticipated issues and shared how she proactively addressed politics among the school board members and herself.

I had a retreat with board members to discuss how we were going to operate because if they were trying to question whether I should be paid, then I didn't want us to get into this trap that every single thing that I did, I was going to have to face that same questioning process. We had a retreat, and we laid out ground rules for how we would operate.

Politics, as mentioned by the superintendents, usually revolves around the school board and the school community that one serves. It is a reality of the position that is accepted, but politics is not often loved. In most cases, school boards have the power and autonomy to choose and hire the superintendent of their choice. Once hired, the superintendent's mission is to lead the school board and the entire school district in the direction that he or she sees fit, despite the contradicting predicament of needing to advise and lead his or her own bosses (the school board members) at times. This complex relationship between the superintendent and the school board was a topic that caused quite a few of the superintendents to express their unhappiness with their jobs.

Despite having achieved their positions, the superintendents were still vocal about the woes that come along when a school board and superintendent are not equally yoked or matched with each other. The Collector explicitly stated that boards consider themselves getting a package, and they often seek a particular mold. The Loner and the Contractor both expressed a lack of ease with their school boards and/or communities. The Loner shared that her school board's members did not all approve of her being the superintendent. She explained that her extensive work has forced them to "tolerate" her, but that it is clear they do not all support her. The Contractor no longer felt appreciated by her community and school board, admitting that she would likely not remain in her district. She explicitly stated what some of the other superintendents alluded to—that is, the reality that African Americans seeking the superintendency do not have the luxury of neglecting to research school board membership and community demographics because such factors are major determinants of whether or not a community and/or school board would be receptive to an African American superintendent and especially an African American female superintendent.

Contracts

When considering board politics, it is important to recognize the obvious contention that occurs in contract negotiations after accepting a position. Contract negotiations is a topic that was unique to the interviews with superintendents due to the high level of flexibility in superintendent negotiations. The discussions about contracts were not lengthy, but they were quite impactful for possible aspiring superintendents. On

this point, two superintendents were very candid regarding their past experiences and

offered advice for future superintendents.

> The Loner: What I would say to a female is definitely know where you are and what you can actually live with. Right now if they (school board) said goodbye tomorrow, I'm comfortable enough where I've saved enough—invest well. I'm comfortable, so at any time they can say goodbye and I would say okay. You always want in your contract, if we decide this is not a good relationship, I need a year and I'm gone. We don't have to fight about this in public. Let's just say we're good.

> The Negotiator: You always have to look at the contract of the person ahead of you because you would never want to accept less than the person that was there before you. One of the things that I had advice on was putting in your contract what options you have, like for taking vacation days or for speaking engagements, whether there's a district car. You need advice on making sure that in your initial contract, it is well established how you will be treated. [The] little details really define that relationship between the board and the superintendent because if you don't define it, once you get in it, you're not going to get those kind of things added later. Your first contract will be your best one.

The Loner shared that limits or non-negotiables for oneself should be internally and

individually established in order to know when a tenure should come to an end. She

advised that a newly hired superintendent add a clause to her contract that establishes a

mutual separation period between the district and herself should issues arise; in other

words, that any kind of contract termination should not become a public battle, but rather

a gradual separation that takes place over a year. The Negotiator shared that a

superintendent's contract needs to be well-planned and requires input and guidance from

others. She cautioned to never accept less in salary and benefits than a predecessor; be

specific about the perks and/or allowances that may include professional development,

travel, transportation, etc.; and to spend sufficient time creating the first contract in order

to include necessary and appropriate details.

Advocacy

When one is a district superintendent, sometimes the politics goes beyond the

school board, and the leader must begin to advocate on the state and federal level. This

situation can sometimes produce internal conflicts, considering that most superintendents

were teachers and, thus, interested in children and remaining connected to their true

purpose - making the lives of children better through a more hands-on approach that is

made difficult by the need to advocate beyond the district level.

> The Negotiator: I think the most disturbing part for me and it's the reality now, is that my job becomes 80% politics. It's politics internally, it's with the board, it's with the community, it's with the state, and it's at the federal level. It is that fifty thousand, hundred thousand foot view that the superintendent's supposed to have. If you're going to be a superintendent in this state, you have to be astute enough to track that (policy changes on the state and federal level) and to know when you have to step in because it's getting ready to impact your district.

Studies show that women superintendents have a higher chance of having established

more of an instructional career and thus prefer the work involving direct contact with

schools and children. While direct contact is often a first love and precipice for seeking

the superintendency, some are not always as passionate about the advocacy that takes

them away from (physically) from schools and children. Consequently, a part of the

superintendency that is not often discussed is the need for advocacy on behalf of one's

constituents and district. From a local perspective, advocacy is regularly expressed in the

form of funding advocacy from local governments so that schools receive adequate

funding. Advocacy, beyond the local level, can include state and federal advocacy and can extend beyond funding and into policy. The Negotiator addressed the fact that she was often called to deal with politics and advocacy issues beyond her ability to physically visit schools. She shared that while she preferred face-to-face encounters with her district constituents, she felt that she was needed on a broader stage in order to properly serve her community.

While politics were a reality that most superintendents did not enjoy, it proved to be only one of the realities of being an African American female school district superintendent. The superintendents shared their experiences with barriers to their success and how those barriers affected them professionally and personally.

Theme Three: Barriers to Success

Participants shared stories about experiences involving discrimination and other obstacles, a commonality that spread throughout all of their interviews. Each superintendent internalized and dealt with the discrimination differently, and some attributed it more to race than gender, and some to a mixture of the two. However, each participant acknowledged its existence. In addition to managing politics, barriers to success regularly shaped the role and experiences of African American female district superintendents. Within the experiences of the African American female superintendent with barriers to success, the women shared experiences with barriers that included stereotypes, race and gender discrimination, a need to be the best, family duties, and lack of professional supports through mentoring and networking.

Stereotypes

The need to be confident in one's self and identity was echoed by all. Some

examples of this attitude are included from interviews with the Mover and the Collector.

> The Mover: They (aspiring superintendents) have to be confident in who they are
> prior to moving in to the superintendent position. If they have some issues around
> self-esteem or image, they need to work on those. You will be called everything
> but a child of God. People will throw every kind of dagger they can at you, and
> you have to be able to be strong to know who you are and what you've been
> called (spiritually) to do.

> The Collector: I think coming in I had to be aware that they may have certain
> stereotypes about a woman or about an African American woman, and so I just
> need[ed] to come in and be a genuine, sincere human being. Which is not that
> hard for me because I am who I am, I'm not going to try to do anything different,
> but you have to be aware of what those are.

The Collector went on to explain how stereotypes should be addressed rather than

ignored so that it does not become a detriment to the career of the individual.

> I don't know if we (African American female superintendents) addressed
> misperceptions in interviews in a very clear, transparent way. I think what we
> tend to do is pretend it's not there, and I think there is a way, when you come into
> an interview situation, for you to just address it. I think if you kind of know those
> misperceptions coming in, you can prepare your opening statement, your closing
> statement, your response to certain questions that can get rid of that so people can
> get beyond it.

Race and Gender Discrimination

The extent that discrimination was based more on race or gender is unclear and

seemed to be compounded, in agreement with the research, by having the characteristics

of both.

The Mover: We still have issues around race in our country. You think about the glass ceiling as it relates to women moving higher in leadership, there are still issues not only around race, but gender. The glass ceiling still exists, it is truly still a daily fight to get more African American women in leadership, but our children, our girls: black, white, Hispanic, and Asian, need to see more women in leadership, and so it's important that we keep trying to break that glass ceiling.

The Collector: Most of the barriers I've experienced was because I was a woman, I really have never felt discriminated against because I was African American. I think that this is traditionally been a male job, and so it's very hard for your school boards, who very often are traditionally male [and] older, to really see [that] a woman can come in and have the strength and the courage to do something that maybe a man could do. Sometimes when you do have the strength and the courage to do something that is perceived to be the work of a man, it's thought of as you're being a you know what, or you're difficult; whereas if the same behaviors were exhibited from a male, they would have just been fine.

I remember being asked questions that I'm just not sure I would have been asked if I were a man. [Such as]: what does your husband think about you interviewing for this job? They would have never asked a man that.

The Collector even went on to explain how she encountered discrimination against those who were not married.

He (head hunter) said some board members really don't like having females who are not married because they will struggle if you're dating someone, and if that person's in the community, and they just might have an issue with that.

The Climber and The Negotiator both addressed gross disparities in financial compensation in comparison to predecessors and others in similar capacities and the need to assertively advocate for fair salary packages.

After The Climber moved up from a principalship, one participant's mentee/male successor was paid ten thousand more dollars than she despite his inexperience. The explanation given for this unequal compensation agreement was that he needed to be able

to support his family. This kind of scenario furthers the societal construct of the man as

the financial provider.

> God would have it, one day somebody happened to leave a sheet on the copier that had all the salaries. I was the lowest paid principal, African American principal, first female, African American principal with the lowest pay. It was another woman here, she was white but she was still at the bottom of the pay so we found that it was discrimination, not only for me being black, but from her being a female. I mentored the principal that took the job that I had when I moved to central office. They brought him in $10,000 higher than me. They told me it was because he had a family.

The Negotiator was offered less money than the superintendent that she was succeeding,

despite the same responsibilities.

> They offered me a contract with less money than the superintendent who was leaving. They pointed to my quote, unquote, inexperience, so it was a line in the sand for me and I said to them very simply, "Well, what works that the previous superintendent had to do, what are you going to remove from the plate." They were like, what do you mean? If you're going to pay me less, that means you must expect less of me than the prior superintendent, so if I'm doing the same job, even if it's a dollar more, I'm not taking less. You have to be strong enough to stand up for yourself and not allow people to define you.

Marital status and sexuality are topics that are actionable if brought into the hiring

process. Nonetheless, as confirmed by several study participants, African American

female candidates for the superintendency are often confronted with unprofessional

questions, subtly inferring race and gender considerations, regarding their viability as

leaders. For example, one of the participants was asked in an interview how her husband

felt about her taking the position of superintendent. This question would not have likely

been a point of discussion for a male superintendent candidate because of the assumption that he is the provider and, thus, makes the decisions regarding career moves and plans.

Need to be the Best

Despite the discrimination and obstacles encountered, these African American female superintendents persevered and reached their collective goal of leading a school district. Several shared that their success was deliberately planned and required intentionality, a point that resonated across the study. In order to be successful, African American females must be the best, as evidenced by several participants.

> The Loner: You probably encountered having to feel that you had to do more, work harder, be more prepared, overly prepared for things. You had to go above and beyond to do what maybe a male superintendent or even a white superintendent [who is] female [would do]. You always have to go above and beyond all the time, you're always at 120%—always.

> The Mover: When you lay your credentials against someone else and your experiences, [there are still] questions about your abilities to do the job and to lead—that's (racism) still an issue.

> The Juggler: Being a female and African American, whenever I'd interview for jobs I made sure that my interview skills were superior. If I didn't get the job, it was not going to be because of the color of my skin or because I didn't have the credentials, [or] that I didn't have the experience. My work ethic and commitment to knowing what I needed to know to be effective in my various job responsibilities has been the drive to make sure that I'm refined, and that I'm a polished administrator. We (African American females) have to be over-prepared. Our experiences are necessary because that's what's going to make us stand out because we're not going to get picked all because of who we know.

The "glass ceiling" or labyrinth is a reality that is so well-known and expected by women that strategies to overcome it are natural and instinctual. All of the superintendents agreed that the opposition they face is so prevalent and, at times, so

detrimental to one's sense of self that African American female superintendents must be incredibly self-aware and confident in themselves. The study participants all stressed being overly prepared and efficient relative to their professional abilities and careers. Participants shared that when they did anticipate discrimination along their career paths, they made sure that their resumes, work ethics, professional experiences, etc. were the best and so far above the other candidates that they would stand out. Black, professional women understand and anticipate discrimination to the point that they readily overcompensate in order to position themselves as the only viable candidates for the jobs they are seeking. All of these superintendents shared the knowledge that they were the best at what they do, and that they deserved every accolade they had ever received.

These women were/are often juggling various, competing roles; yet, they prioritize the demands placed upon them and find ways to satisfy them all. These superintendents all achieved doctoral degrees in the midst of career climbing, raising families, and living life. As The Negotiator stated, her grandkids only see and care about her being "Grandma," and she has to make sure that her career does not interfere with that role and expectation.

Family as Barriers

In addition to managing barriers to success that include differing forms of oppression, a lack of flexibility for professional marketability due to familial responsibilities were shared that included family duties, role reversal in marriage, and a lack of mobility also presented themselves as barriers to success for the Superintendents.

Family duties. Family responsibilities served as both a major support and, sometimes, obstacle for the female superintendents. Regardless of their career successes, they were women, wives, mothers, and daughters. The Negotiator added in the comfort of having adult children who no longer required child-rearing as well as the responsibility of caring for aging parents.

> [My experiences with family] have been positive in that I didn't become superintendent until my children had graduated from high school and college. Women, even in these jobs, if you're married, you still have all the expectations. This is just a woman's life all over the world, of the home and the children and the husband and all those kinds of things. It's been traditionally accepted for men to excuse themselves from some of those (duties) because of their job. Well, I'm still grandma.
>
> The other part that you never ever can get away from is, as your parents grow older, that's a responsibility, a loving obligation, so you can't separate your family life from the superintendency, and the superintendency takes 120% of your time.

Because the superintendency requires an enormous amount of time commitment, this also means time away from family. For some, the responsibilities of the superintendency may require a role reversal in the marriage which can cause a strain on the marital relationship. One superintendent revealed that her marriage ended when she began acquiring more power.

Role reversal in marriage. Society has normalized the roles of women and men in relationships and in power structures. Being an African American female superintendent sometimes requires flexibility in those traditional roles. Sometimes the lack of flexibility, on the part of either party, can create difficulties in the relationships.

The Loner: If you're married, sometimes men cannot handle that—women with a lot of power. I was just going into the principalship and had been married for 15 years, and my husband said, "I didn't sign up for you to be gone all the time, I didn't sign up for this," and we divorced. I'm married (again) now, but we (her and previous husband) divorced. There are black men who believe that black women should be in power, but only so much power.

The Collector: I remember [my former superintendent and mentor (female)] telling me when I took the job, you just need to know that being a superintendent in these large urban districts is very hard on marriages, and she said you really have to work at it because she said you'll find yourself walking out of the office at nine, ten o'clock at night going home, and you're like ships passing in the night. She said it's not going to work like that; so I always kept that in the back of my mind.

There has to be times when you just shut out this (work of superintendent) and really focus on your relationships because, at the end of the day, that will sustain you to be able to come here and do this work.

The Juggler: Before it was him (husband) being gone and I'm holding down the fort because he was away at a job, and I'm taking care of the kids with the help of family. Now it's the reverse, and he is the one that's with the children more and being there for them when I'm not at home or when I have a commitment.

If you don't have a strong marriage, the superintendency will kill it. So the first thing is working on that marriage, and when I became superintendent my kids and my husband and I had a conversation about, "Can you all handle this, because everything you do will be in the paper, you are on the spotlight, you reflect me." When you become a superintendent, that is the negative impact on the family. I turned opportunities down [in the past] because it would have negatively impacted my family.

Another dimension to the issues of a role reversal is the burdens that accompany being the highest earner in a home as a woman. A great number of African American female superintendents are often the "bread winners" in their families and, yet, this point is rarely celebrated; in fact, sometimes it is even frowned upon. One superintendent commented on the ridicule that her husband receives annually when her salary is published in the local newspaper. This double standard is the reality that these women

have lived with and compensated for within their relationships. While the higher salary

is celebrated and expected for a superintendent, it can prove embarrassing for a husband

when the female superintendent is clearly the financial "breadwinner." This may cause

the woman to overcompensate in other areas to not emasculate her husband. This

overcompensation can become an issue for either party.

     Mobility. While family was credited as a huge supporter for the superintendents,

family was also a factor in mobility, which is regularly documented as a deterrent for

people seeking the superintendency. Superintendencies often require that leaders remain

mobile, ready to move themselves and their families for the perfect opportunity. Moving

for a promotion is expected of a man, but not normally of a woman. It requires uprooting

one's family; a concession requires a special partnership. Ideally, having a family and

being superintendent can provide the best of both worlds: career and personal balance.

     Out of all the superintendents included in this study, the Mover was the only

married superintendent, still raising children, who remained mobile. She shared that any

decision to move for an opportunity of career advancement was always decided upon as a

family.

> The Mover (who remained mobile): When we (family) look at what opportunities
> are presented, we look at how it will impact the entire family, what will be the
> opportunities and what will be the challenges.

The Collector moved throughout her career as well and still practices a semi-flexible

living arrangement for the sake of her superintendency. She and her husband lived in two

different states while dating and for the majority of their first year of marriage. She

eventually moved to his state to be closer to him, although still living in two different cities.

Despite the benefits of remaining mobile, some superintendents made the decision to not move for opportunities and still became superintendents. One example was the Juggler who was not mobile, and who also offered advice regarding maintaining the family while being successful as a superintendent.

> The Juggler: I am not a mobile superintendent. I wouldn't pick up now and go. We wanted to be among family, and so it's a life choice for us. It is not an interest of ours right now for either of us to be mobile, but once [our youngest child] graduates from high school, then we know we have a little bit more flexibility, and if I move out of state—I move out of state.
>
> You have to take care of your personal family and those relationships are important. You have to give as much attention to that as you can and make the time for that, even though you are extremely busy.

Family dynamics can complicate, but more importantly, enrich the lifestyle of a superintendent. The lack of mobility of superintendents was accepted but also mentioned as a barrier for marketability for some superintendencies.

Lack of Professional Support Systems

The political nature of American education makes it increasingly important to network, while also making it more difficult. Some of the superintendents spoke of the lack of networks for superintendents and the resulting loneliness. The loneliness of being at the top of one's career is a reality in a variety of professional fields. The Mover and the Loner both shared that they lacked adequate superintendent networks. The Mover compared the differences in networking as a superintendent and as a principal. She

explained that there are countless opportunities and freedoms in networking as a

principal. She implied that the political nature of the superintendency creates a barrier

that was not present during the principalship, despite the fact that the principalship is

considered a common step towards the superintendency. The Mover shared that she

sought out other superintendents, but many of those individuals failed to follow up or

maintain the relationships. Both women wanted to connect with other superintendents

whom they could trust, but felt loneliness when that expectation was not fulfilled.

> The Loner: I asked a couple of questions but sometimes people (superintendents) just don't get back with you, when you really need [them] to. From the perspective of an African American, I need that response right now and you won't be able to get that, so you really have to think about your political circumstances and do the best you can. I mean that's all we can do. It's terrible, but there aren't very many (African American female superintendents).
>
> I have one or two people that I confide in, and then I've found you can't even do that. Sometimes people don't necessarily want to see you doing well on top, they want you to have a struggle.
>
> The Mover: It (the superintendency) is a very lonely position because it's a difference from being a principal, and you cannot call other principals because you can't talk about things and bounce things off because it's so many also complexities to the confidentiality, the personnel issues and all the other dynamics that you have to deal with; and because it's a highly political job, it's very lonely, so it got very lonely for me.
>
> I will say that's still an area for growth for me as far as reaching out, because once again, this is a very high impact job, it's a very busy job. With other African American female superintendents or male superintendents, the turnover for us is high. I think about when I started five years ago, most of the superintendents that started with me or who were sitting superintendents in this state, who were African Americans, half of them are gone. They're no longer superintendents, or they've retired or just done something else.

Networking is a vital component of professional growth and development for all professionals. While networking is traditionally a common practice and not one that requires considerable planning in most fields, the difficulty increases within highly political careers and when great differences exist among the professionals. The highly political nature of the superintendency makes superintendents more cautious about their connections and activities, thereby reducing the opportunities for ready networking. Further, the potential conflicts that can arise from these opportunities are compounded when demographic differences exist.

While barriers to the professional success of the Superintendents appeared to be plentiful, it proved to pale in comparison with the success that could be achieved through the professional and persona support systems that enabled the Superintendents to overcome.

Theme Four: Support Systems

Within the experiences of the African American female Superintendents, the women shared experiences with professional and personal support systems that catapulted them to success.

Professional Support Systems

The multifaceted job of a superintendent requires a multitude of supports in order to preserve the person in the position and continuously grow as a professional. While much support is needed, participants addressed a lack of supports as well as some of the support systems that helped make them successful. Professional support systems proved to be invaluable to the success of the African American Superintendents. The

professional support systems consisted mostly of networks and mentoring and each contributed to the career path in different but significant ways.

      Mentoring. Mentoring was pivotal in all of the superintendents' careers. The Negotiator shared a quote that was powerful regarding preparedness for mentoring: "A mentor can only be a mentor if you're willing to be a mentee, if you're willing to listen."

      Mentoring is one of the most, if not the most, important factors in establishing a career successful enough to reach the very top of one's profession. Superintendents are very often the products of deliberate and ongoing mentoring. Within the realm of mentoring, there is negative mentoring and positive mentoring. Negative mentoring is when someone experiences working with or for someone, and that negative experience establishes practices that they actually wish to avoid in their own careers. The Collector shared that she encountered individuals who modeled behaviors that she decided to go against or steer clear of in her own practice. The Juggler was encouraged to seek advancement because of her feeling that she was supporting leaders who were not as capable or prepared as herself. She stated that she often performed the job of many and was led by those she did not feel appreciated her effort or expertise. Those feelings are reflective in her leadership style. She attempts to show appreciation for the work and effort of others and does not ask others to extend themselves beyond her willingness to do the same.

      In addition to networking, mentoring proved to be pivotal to the career progression of the Superintendents. Mentoring was experienced through negative

mentors, positive mentors, and even through the mutually beneficial act of mentoring others.

Negative mentors. All of the superintendents proved that they were willing to learn from the experiences of those more established than themselves. However, some superintendents shared that they learned just as much from the leaders that they did not wish to be like as those that they revered.

> The Collector: You also have people you meet along the way that help you frame what your leadership style looks like that may be opposite. Sometimes you work with leaders that don't necessarily give you what you want as a leader, but you learn from that experience as well. You take away, "I don't think I should do that when I'm supervising certain people."

> The Juggler: I supported two superintendents who I felt could have done a better job than what they were doing, and also questioned how in the world did they become a superintendent, and I'm not a superintendent yet. It's about that time that I said, well if they can do it, I certainly am going to do it, and I'm going to get paid for all this work I'm doing.

Positive mentors. Mentoring seemed to have the most profound effect on the career trajectory of the sitting superintendents, so much so that the Collector shared that she sought out mentors.

> The Collector: Back then I was just so intentional about having mentors, I would just pick up the phone and call people and say, "Will you be my mentor?" Well, I don't do that anymore.

The Loner talked about the implications of most superintendents being mentored into the position. If there is a lack of mentors, there will be a lack of superintendents. She reiterates the lack of appeal or desire for the position.

> The Loner: I don't know very many people who really want to do some of these jobs. I bet a lot of female superintendents have been kind of mentored into the position. It's not something that you often just seek to do. I'd love to see women who would come in and say, "I want to be superintendent." I've not met one. I have not met one.

The Negotiator was one of the few to credit her career to African American female

mentors. One was a former teacher of hers, and another was a supervisor.

> I was blessed to have African American mentors in this district. The most influential force in terms of pushing me was an assistant superintendent at that time, in the district, and she was like the grandmother of all of us. So a job came open in central office, and she pushed me to interview for it. She then began to mentor me toward the administrative ranks. I was pushed into doing it; obviously, it's something that I decided to continue to do, but I didn't apply for my first job. I was told to come down and interview.
>
> [My mentors] talked about how you handle your friends, and how you handle your private life. I had people who gave me life experience of lessons learned. People saw things in me based upon my work and guided me even when I didn't want to be guided. I've had the fortune of working for two superintendents that really pushed me also.

A female mentored The Loner into the position of superintendent, but once she was

successful, the mentoring ended abruptly.

> I had a mentor, and when she saw that I was doing okay, she stopped speaking, stopped calling. She was very supportive, but when she got in and saw that I was doing okay, she just stopped speaking. [Some] people want you in these positions to fail so they can call them back. It's lonely, and you have to be okay with that.

A superintendent offered a principalship and mentoring in the same conversation to The

Mover. The superintendent shared that she was needed at a particular elementary school

and that mentoring, from him, would be part of the packaged deal.

It was a wonderful opportunity, it was a wonderful incentive, not only financially but professionally. In our conversations he said, "If you're willing to come in and do the work, I'll mentor you and I'll help you move higher." He kept his word, and I'm here today because of that mentor and that support.

The Collector spoke of a mentor with a similar impact on her career.

I had really great mentors who were male; most of the mentors I had were male. I had a superintendent who hired me who was an African American male, whom I respect to this day. He made the comment, "You've [have to] run your own ship." If you're not running your own ship at some point, it's hard for you to have credibility as you're moving your career.

The Juggler spoke of having a white male mentor who became an Assistant Superintendent and the impact that he had on her career. In the second quote, she commented on the overall impact that two male mentors had throughout her career.

He actually became my mentor the rest of that time because he was very instrumental in helping me take over the principalship.

They were definitely encouraging and motivating and encouraging me [through saying], "You need to do this, you need to do this, you need to do that, this is a good opportunity for you, take advantage of it." I've always had male mentors. And throughout this time there's only, maybe one total, one female mentor.

Positive mentoring is more commonly considered when discussing mentoring as a general topic. Positive mentoring occurs when someone productively leads another individual to engage in practices or seek opportunities beyond the mentee's present career status. This kind of positive mentoring can be sporadic or ongoing. Each of the superintendents mentioned at least one mentor who led her to seek an opportunity or promotion.

Mentoring others. Many of the women mentioned being responsible for encouraging others to seek promotions and greater responsibility.

> The Negotiator: I am pushing them out of the nest. You're always trying to get somebody to be the next one to take your job.

One superintendent, The Climber, was very adamant about her support of an Aspiring Superintendents conference. She was often involved in the conference, serving as a mentor for participants, and even offering to assist me as the researcher in registering for the conference. Her interview was so inspiring and felt like a personal mentoring session for myself, rather than a dissertation study. She shared why mentoring others was so important to her.

> The Climber: Just like I'm taking time with you today, I just feel like I have to do that because somebody did it for me. I really feel strongly about you being successful. As a black female, if this is something you want to do, I'm going to talk to you about the hurdles and the obstacles and the barriers, but I'm going to tell you [that] you can do it.

There are a myriad of lessons that can be gleaned from the lives of district leaders and superintendents, especially by those who are most likely to experience similar barriers. Both groups of district leaders shared experiences pertaining to the route to district leadership, the politics involved in leading a district, barriers experienced as a Black female in leadership, and support systems activated to increase their successful outcomes.

Although mentoring others was a topic of discussion, it was not widely addressed as an intentional practice by all participants, likely due to the newness of the

superintendency for some. The Collector explicitly stated that she was too new to have

gathered a good gauge of others and their future aspirations in order to serve as a mentor.

The Negotiator spoke about her custom of pushing employees to seek advancement, even

if that meant leaving her district. The Climber appeared to be the most intentional about

mentoring others. As a volunteer for an Aspiring Superintendent's preparation institute,

she was particularly passionate about mentoring and assisting African American females.

She stated that someone helped her, and she felt the need to pay it forward. In addition to

benefitting from mentoring, Superintendents also benefitting from Superintendent

Networks because of shared experiences and interests.

 Superintendent networks. Professionally, networking can be almost as helpful

in career growth as mentoring. It allows for professionals to lean on the connections and

expertise of other individuals and *their* connections as well. The impact of networking

over mentoring is unclear, but there is a clear need for both. Networking creates that

collegiality with people who understand your challenges or position, while mentoring is

working closely with someone who can lead you to promotions or increased efficacy in a

current position. Considering that the study participants in this group are current

superintendents at the top of their professions, most mention of mentoring was from the

past. As such, these participants explained those past mentorships to show how some of

the superintendents were able to navigate the labyrinth or avoid the glass ceiling.

 Networking become increasingly difficult when one is in a highly politicized field

and, even more, if one seeks to network and glean ideas from the experiences of

individuals who have similar experiences and, thus, encounter the same barriers. Some

of the most seemingly satisfied superintendents were able to speak about networks that

supported and understood the work with which they were engaged.

> The Collector: I still have two folks that I stay in pretty constant contact with, one who was in a superintendency and one who is currently in a superintendency, and we'll call each other and say, "Hey, I'm thinking about doing this, have you done that?" And that's important, I think, as you move from position to position you continue to nurture relationships.

She also went on to speak of an informal cohort of superintendents within her state that

serve as her superintendent sounding board and assist in supporting each other in the

work that they have embarked upon.

> We (network of district leaders) check with each other. I don't know if it's a mentor at this point, I think it's more of a support group. And I think the people you surround yourself with really make a difference in how you continue to grow as a leader. So I really have chosen to be around folks who are very positive, people who do good work, and people who have good reputations. I think those are the kind of folks you really want to surround yourself with.

> One of the ladies who is in our region (of superintendents within the state) sent us a email, all of us who are females, and she said, "Guys, we need to start going to lunch together." Since then we have just started going to lunch together, sitting at meetings together, that kind of thing, and it's made a world of difference. So I think sometimes it just kind of happens, so we consider ourselves more of a support group.

> The Negotiator: You also have to be very careful about surrounding yourself with people who know you well enough that they can help you with the personal stresses as well as the job—they're confident, they do their job, but they also care about you as a person, and that's rare when people slip around and flip around all the time.

> The Climber: I have a young lady I call and say, "Let me piggy back, let me throw this out, what do you think?" With her experience, she's been superintendent maybe three or four times in large districts, small districts, she has a lot of experience so I utilize those services.

The Collector was the one superintendent who shared that she had an active network of superintendents, African American female and otherwise. It should be stated that she also actively sought out networks and even established a network or cohort within her own state so that she and other superintendents could feel supported by each other and increase their effectiveness. The Collector was a newer superintendent and seemed quite fulfilled in her position, indicating that she felt supported by colleagues she knew and respected. Nonetheless, relative to this group of superintendents/study participants in general, the lack of networking opportunities with other African American female superintendents seemed to be a major factor in job satisfaction.

To conclude, the presence of a professional network of readily available and willing colleagues was pinpointed as a major need among the superintendents. The Negotiator, the Climber, and the Collector all shared that they participated in a network or networks that fulfilled their need to be supported in their roles. While networking relationships often involved addressing professional dilemmas, these connections also nurtured the superintendents as human beings, and ensured that they were emotionally healthy.

In addition to benefitting from professional support systems, Superintendents shared that personal support systems were enabling forces to allow them to continue in their professional careers.

Personal Support Systems

Personal support systems proved to be instrumental in the emotional health that supported the Superintendents and equally as important as the professional support

systems. The personal support systems included a supportive husband who proved to be their biggest supporter through their professional journeys.

Alongside the politics, discrimination, and other pitfalls attendant to being at the top of one's field as an African American woman, the difficulty of going about this journey alone is commonly understood. Each study participant talked about support systems that gave her the freedom to embrace the enormous responsibilities of the superintendency while still having her personal needs met. The superintendents all credited strong and supportive spousal relationships and family support with helping them achieve their success, noting that the nature of this kind of support can often require a level of flexibility that is not typically expected in a relationship.

Supportive husband. The obstacles and challenges for these superintendents were real and difficult. However, they all credited a supportive husband with making the journey more comfortable.

> The Collector: You definitely want to be with a partner who gets [that] this is your need. You really want to have somebody who understands where you're going. If you don't have that I think it could be a real problem. I'm just so lucky because there's a lot of coming and going, and he's just very open to that. I got married much later in life, and it's because I was a hard driver with my career, a very hard driver.

> The Climber: What helps me [is that] I have a husband that I can piggyback [on]. They tell me you also come the closest to divorce in this position (superintendency); you're never at home, you're gone all the time, our roles have reversed, my husband has retired, he works a part-time job but he does a lot of the cooking, a lot of the cleaning. I have to give him kudos and credit. He helps me in the morning getting ready for work, making sure I have everything I need. If I get home late at night, my dinner is ready but he gets tired, too, and sometimes he lets me know, "This is not what I thought it was going to be," but then he'll turn right around and say, "You know, you're tired, I got the dishes."

The Negotiator: You learn quickly that home better be the support structure. If you're not married, it's your mom, your dad, your sisters, because there are also some very confidential things that you deal with, some things that you shouldn't [discuss] and be very careful about [that]. A friend isn't really a friend sometimes. My husband and I, when we get ready to have a dinner, an intimate dinner, we leave town. That's one of the reasons he travels with me, we go out and have special occasion dinners like in California or in someplace else, so nobody knows that I'm the superintendent. When you have to have that real delicate balance, and you can almost have too many friends.

The Juggler shared how her superintendency required a shifting of domestic duties to her and her husband's mothers.

I am blessed and still have both my mom and his mom. I have not cooked but maybe four times in the past year. I don't have time to cook.

The impact of professional support systems has been widely documented and this study furthers to support that professional support systems are vital to a successful career of any upward mobile person. It is especially important in the careers of African American Women who encounter barriers to success that others may not. While not discounting the importance of professional supports, the participants were very transparent about the fact that their families and husbands were their biggest support systems and that their husbands made countless concessions to assist in their successful career development and success. Each of the superintendents were married and each characterized her husband as her inner circle, biggest supporter, and closes confidante. The successes of the Superintendents were due to various supports, professional and personal alike.

Summary

This chapter focused on the experiences of the African American Female School District Superintendents who were included in this study. Their experiences en route to the superintendency, the politics encountered, barriers to success that they have experienced, and support systems that have supported them throughout their careers were shared in depth. Chapter VI will include an analysis of the data and findings that resulted from the study of the District Leaders and Superintendents included in this study.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The preceding chapters, Chapter IV and Chapter V, reported on the study's interview process by presenting selected excerpts from participants' interviews and providing analyses of the findings that emerged from the subsequent data. Chapter IV focused on the District Leaders who were not yet superintendents and Chapter V focused on the Superintendents. Chapter VI consists of a summary of the study frameworks, discussion of findings, implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion.

Summary of the Study Frameworks

Problem and Purpose of the Study

The title of the dissertation study is *African American Female School District Leaders: Their Career Experiences and Support Systems*. In my quest as an African American female school administrator to decide on my future career plans, I noticed that the proverbial yellow brick road ended for me at the school principalship. If I desired to move beyond the school level, more information needed to be gathered and new support systems established.

Studies have been published about the highly political and highly visible public position of the school district superintendency. In particular, studies of the

superintendency conducted by the American Association of School Administrators are widely recognized and published consistently every ten years. Occasionally, a special edition is published that may address a certain topic or address a major shift in published research or trends surrounding the superintendency. While these published studies are readily available, only recently were minorities and women of color addressed as standalone groups representing more specific trends in school district administration that deserve and need to be shared (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). The oppression that has eclipsed the professional journey of the African American female school district leader, superintendent or not, has been prevalent enough that studies have failed to highlight the differences in the route of African American Females to district level leadership which, by omission, made their route appear to mirror the usually published information that focused on white male superintendents.

This study includes seven non-superintendent district leaders and six superintendents, all African American females, so that a comparison of the two groups is possible. The prevalence of trends and shared experiences allow readers to make informed decisions with intentionality and potentially avoid some of the barriers common for those seeking district level leadership. The group of non-superintendent district leaders is mixed with superintendent aspirants, those not interested, and those undecided in future endeavors. The group of superintendents is mixed with novice and veteran superintendents.

Epistemological Framework

As a possible aspirant to the superintendency, I desired to study the experiences of those African American females whose accomplishments reached beyond the school building into central office, all the way to the superintendency. I desired to study the experiences of those who looked like me, African American women educational leaders. To be clear, the purpose of this study is to share the career experiences of African American female district leaders, including their experiences with support systems, for the benefit of providing tools or a yellow brick road for other African American female educators. As such, Black Feminist Thought stands as the epistemological framework of the study and its exclusive focus on the experiences of African American women for other African American women.

In order to understand Black Feminist Thought, one must first aim to understand its origin from within Black Feminist Epistemology. The following four tenets of Black Feminist Epistemology have informed every stage of this study design and its implementation.

1. *Concrete Experience as a Criterion for Meaning*

In order for black women to survive in a society and world that has traditionally oppressed and subjugated our knowledge claims, we have learned to utilize "wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions" (Collins, 2009, p. 275) allows us to overcome those oppressions. Traditionally, black women have been taught to listen and learn from other's experiences so that we do not repeat costly mistakes. Specifically pertaining to this study, it is vital that other black women consider

the experiences shared by these school district leaders so that they, as potential future leaders, can learn from the district leaders' stories of their careers in educational leadership.

2. *Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims*

Our African roots and persisting customs value "connectedness and the use of dialogue . . . for methodological adequacy" (Collins, 2009, p. 279). I began the interview process by first sharing information about myself in order to better establish relationships with the study participants and to make the flow of dialogue possible. This connectedness is evident in the emphasis on family and husbands throughout the study. As an engaged researcher, study participants mentored me by offering concrete advice in the area of life/work balance based on their own experiences, professionally, and personally. Even with participants whom I had never met before, there was a sisterhood and an unspoken connection about our solidarity concerning our life paths.

3. *Ethic of Care*

The ethic of care includes an emphasis on expressed emotion, an "emphasis on individual uniqueness" (Collins, 2009, p. 282), and the capacity for empathy. As evidenced in the words of the participants, meaningful commentaries and understandings emerged due to the sense of comfort and care that underscored our conversations. This ethic of care is not indicative of their education or background but represents much more of a kinship that Black Women share. In this way, these women became family and "othermothers" (Collins, 2009, p. 209) to me during an hour or two of interview time that often felt more like conversation.

4. Ethic of Personal Accountability

The participants were open and honest and validated their knowledge through specific naming of places and people. They spoke freely and openly about their experiences so that other Black Women, including myself, would not have to endure the same struggles. I am also connecting their blind trust in me to the fact that I assured them that I would maintain their anonymity despite their notoriety. Overall, finding the participants to be more open than I might have initially be expected (despite IRB), I attribute their readiness to share to my expressed understanding that hurting one of us (black women) hurts us all.

Methodology

The qualitative interview study was conducted using open-ended questions with all of the study participants. Participants included two groups of African American female school district leaders: (a) Seven non-superintendent district leaders, and (b) Six superintendents totaling 13 total study participants. Each participant shared her experiences in a face-to-face or phone interview that included fourteen questions, all stemming from the overarching research questions. While participants were located in various states, geographical and other identifying data were omitted to maintain their anonymity.

Research questions and major themes. The two primary research questions designed to address the concerns of this study were:

1. What are the driving forces behind black female professionals pursuing or not pursuing the district level leadership?

2. What experiences with support systems lead or led to the district level

leadership for black women?

The interview questions included in the interview protocol (Appendix B) guided

the dialogue and resulting data were embedded into the four resulting themes. Major

themes that resulted from the study for both groups of participants were: (a) Route to

district leadership and/or the superintendency, (b) Politics, (c) Barriers to success, and (d)

Support systems. Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 9 led to Theme 1: Route to district leadership

and/or the superintendency; Questions 8, 11, and 12 led to Theme 2: Politics; Questions

6, 8, 10, and 11 led to Theme 3: Barriers to success; and Questions 6, 7, 8, and 11 led to

Theme 4: Support Systems. While all participants spoke to the themes, some of the

themes yielded more findings from one group more than the other. In-depth findings

from the participants were shared in Chapters IV and V; however, this chapter will share

only the study outcomes that are most beneficial to understanding the two

aforementioned research questions and are structured using themes that arose from the

data analysis.

Discussion of Findings

The data extracted from the interviews of the thirteen participants led to the major

themes that emerged from this study; and as predicted by the epistemological framework

of Black Feminist Thought, represented participants' shared experiences and beliefs

despite their differences in location, tenure, and leadership position because all of the

participants were Black Women, first and foremost. I have organized the study findings

according to the identified primary themes, to also include sub-themes, thereby

spotlighting the shared experiences and the differences among the African American Women. Not all of the sub-themes are discussed at length in this chapter as I chose to focus on those themes and sub-themes that were most prevalent across several participant interviews or those that have emerged as highly impactful to the future aspirations of anyone reading this study for professional guidance. While Table 4 and Table 5 briefly list the findings and implications of this study, the remainder of this chapter expounds on those points.

Table 4

Summarized Findings

Summarized Findings
• The road to district level leadership and the superintendent travels straight through the principalship.
• Black women must be selective when choosing a superintendent. While we are often sought after to turnaround high poverty, low performing districts-the task may have barriers that impede acceptable progress within typical tenure periods thus possibly leading to career derailment.
• In order to compete, black women must have the credentials and the experience to make them stand out as the best candidate.
• Barriers should be expected and discrimination often intensifies as the profile of the position increases.
• Mobility increases the number of opportunities; however, homegrown cultivation of potential has proven fruitful in black women due to having established a proven track record of success.
• Cultivating support systems is not an option but is vital to a successful professional and personal life as a district leader. It should be intentional and maintained throughout positional changes in a career.   o Professional support systems increase access to opportunities while personal support systems increase life satisfaction and happiness alongside the professional success.

Table 5

Implications

Implications

• Practitioners of Job Candidates
  o Strategic career planning is needed for black women to position themselves for a superintendency.
  o As a professional would seek a mentor, support groups or circles should be developed and maintained throughout a career.

• Gatekeepers
  o Provide opportunities for mentoring and networking. Mandate participation from veteran superintendents.
  o Increase diversity of applicant pools to ensure fair access.

• University Programs   o Connect learning experiences and research opportunities to future career aspirations. Create connections for students with established professionals while participating in the program.

Route to District Level Leadership

Shoulder tap. The impact of someone in a position of authority and power to

exert direct influence and guidance over the district's leader's professional advancement

was a common theme among the participants, particularly showing up in the repeated

example of the "shoulder tap" leading to needed opportunities. This strategy of grooming

and promotion is in-line with the research about the power of mentors and sponsors. In

fact, the careers of the participants would have likely turned out quite differently minus

the emphasis on the "shoulder tap" that led them into school administration.

The prevalence of the shoulder tap in the experiences of the superintendents

points to the theoretical correlation that if more superintendents are needed, it should be

assumed that someone would be seeking them out and looking for the characteristics

suited to a district leader in an unbiased fashion. Yet, studies show that most headhunters or gatekeepers are white males who are more prone to choosing people who resemble themselves. I suggest that this practice of bias, consciously intentional or otherwise, is one of the explanations for the ongoing rarity of African American female superintendents, especially when one considers that most school boards are comprised of white Americans who are more likely to engage with search firms represented by someone with a similar likeness (Tallerico, 2000). Although African American women are leading some school districts, the trends surrounding the employment of this group indicate that they are selected to serve primarily in high poverty, low performing, and large, urban school districts (Kowalski et al., 2011). On this view, they fit the mold of a superintendent but only in certain locales.

In order to address the paucity of African American women in the superintendency, shoulder tapping should be intentional so that even school districts that are not typically the primary employers of African American women benefit from their leadership. School districts must change hiring practices in order to address this bias. Diversity should be mandated in the applicant pool and should govern search firms and hiring committees so that more African American women are provided access to the interview stage for Superintendent.   Implications for practice regarding this are further discussed in the Implications for Practice.

Appeal of the superintendency. All of the leaders included in this study held the credentials required for the superintendency showing that the degree and/or certification allowed one to be a viable candidate for the position of superintendent but it did not

guarantee that the position was desired. Consequently, during the time of the interview process, the Crusader, a non-superintendent district leader, shared that she was currently seeking a superintendency; and as it turned out, she achieved the mentioned superintendency approximately two months after the interview. This lends credence to the belief that once an African American female made the decision to seek a superintendency and accepted all of the changes that came along with that decision, she would be able to acquire the position despite barriers.

Experience with barriers was consistently present with all thirteen participants and was such a constant and historically shared reality that group strategies were evident amongst all of the women. The similarities between the superintendents and superintendent aspirants show a correlation that provides trends and experiences that increase the successful attainment of the superintendency. However, despite having the credentials and being in a position to overcome barriers to attain the position, it was evident that the position of superintendency does not have widespread appeal and thus is another factor in the superintendency shortage.

The issue of job satisfaction within the superintendency is an area that has been newly documented in studies. To compound the shortage of individuals seeking the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007), and despite the growing number of professionals who are credentialed with prior work experiences and appropriate degrees (Kowalski et al., 2011), there is a real and urgent concern regarding the number of superintendents seeking to leave their positions. Within the context of this study, the superintendency has failed to hold substantial appeal among the participants, with only

two of the seven non-superintendents expressing a desire to seek the superintendency and

only three of the six current superintendents stating that they had actually sought their

positions. Moreover, the superintendency has not maintained its appeal for those

currently holding the position due to the highly stressful realities experienced in this line

of work. Of the six superintendents included in this study, four of them (all of the

superintendents with more than two years of experience in the superintendency)

expressed a desire to leave their current locations and possibly the position of

superintendent altogether.

Attainment of the superintendency. The fact that the overwhelming majority of

the superintendents included in this study were homegrown, groomed for leadership in

their home district, contradicts the research on the topic of superintendent placement,

with such research indicating that superintendents are commonly recruited and imported

into their districts. To clarify, the published trend differs based on the demographic of

the applicant. The following statistics illustrate both the overarching conclusion

regarding the common practice of importing superintendents and the demographic

differences that operate within that conclusion. Approximately 66% of superintendents

included in the 2010 AASA study of superintendents were hired from outside of their

districts. However, large districts (25,000 or more students) were more likely to hire a

superintendent from within the district (Kowalski et al., 2011). Taking into account that

20% of the superintendents of the nation's largest, urban school districts are African

American females, it can be seen that as a particular demographic group, African

American females are more likely to be hired from within their districts which typically

are large, urban school districts. Consequently, while the research speaks to the trend of importing superintendents from outside the hiring district, my study findings show that African American females are able to better prove themselves and establish patterns of success when they are cultivated within their districts. Research on the state of the superintendency and the patterns of success specific to African American women is pivotal to the attainment of the position. The findings of this study and the prevalence of African American females in the largest, urban school district show that the attainment of a superintendency in diverse communities is more likely. Strategic career decisions are needed in order for African American women to overcome the bias that permeates educational leadership and thus aspirants must recognize trends.

Preparation. As highly acclaimed and credentialed individuals, each of the district superintendents in this study felt that her investment in professional preparation was a major factor in being considered for a superintendent position when the opportunity arose. Being "papered up," as termed by one of the superintendents, is not a formal requirement within any state but each participant shared that the absence of credentials would have proven to be a barrier for her. All of the non-superintendent district leaders also held a doctoral degree and superintendent certification—a correlation that increases the implied importance of having the credentials, regardless of the intent to use the credentials. The Juggler shared the perils of previously being interested in a possible district leadership opportunity but not having the credentials to be a contender. There is no coincidence that all of the superintendents in this study held doctoral degrees. While the degree is not required, it is often preferred and the opportunities can only be

actualized when the applicant is properly prepared through experience and credentials. This is a trend across the nation and African American women are leading the charge for degrees pointing to the superintendency. If there is a superintendent shortage and an increase in credentialed African American female candidates, gatekeepers are not cultivating available leadership potential in candidates.

Choosing the job. African American women are celebrated for their strength and yet demonized for that same characteristic when it does not allow for ready popularity or acceptance as a leader "employed in problem-ridden, low-performing districts" (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 18), which can cause career derailment. Consequently, The Negotiator advised on being more selective and not allowing oneself to be the winner and victim simultaneously because of being overly eager to accept a superintendency with challenges that would not likely be rectified within the typical span of a superintendency. This statement about being selective carries with it the embedded belief that if a superintendency is desired, it can be achieved. Furthermore, the regularly documented shortage of superintendents and the findings within this study that showed that all of the leaders who pursued a superintendency-achieved one both point to the ability to overcome barriers and attaining a superintendency. Since attainment is likely, when sought strategically, careful selection of a superintendency is advised so that career longevity is actualized.

Politics

Politics was a theme addressed by both groups of participants. However, the superintendents spoke of experiences that uncovered knowledge not traditionally

included in research or educational leadership literature. The major findings from questions involving politics involved community fit, contract negotiations, and how to work with school boards.

Contracts. Contract negotiations were only addressed by the study's group of superintendents due to the extreme flexibility provided in the creation of the superintendent contract versus the contract of a non-superintendent district leader. Non-superintendent district leaders likely did not mention contracts because their contracts are typically more standardized and limited in regards to the compensation and fringe benefits that superintendents typically incorporate into their contracts. A superintendent's first contract establishes the ongoing relationship between the school board and superintendent, thereby governing how the superintendent will be treated. According to the Negotiator, the newly hired superintendent's first contract is the best contract. This does not mean that salaries and perks will not increase, but it establishes a baseline that can eliminate later strife because raises and contract renegotiation concerns are included, and parameters are outlined in the initial contract. Black Women who are superintendents have to be mindful of contract negotiations to ensure that they are being compensated fairly. Failure to adequately perform the necessary research prior to signing a contract can cause animosity between the superintendent and the school board from the onset of their professional relationship.

School board. School board interactions were a point of contention among most of the superintendents. Non-superintendent district leaders mentioned school board politics mostly in indirect interactions while superintendents have a more direct contact

with school boards due to the school board being his or her direct supervisor. The
Negotiator was one of the superintendents who, early on, anticipated possible strife and
conflict among and possibly with the members of her board. She explained that she
addressed the potential for such problems at the beginning of her superintendency by
facilitating professional development for the board, including ethics training and good
educational practices. She established a protocol for how they would operate as a group
so that conflicts could be dealt with in an agreed upon fashion.

School board interactions are a reality for all district leaders and especially
superintendents. Proactive strategies and transparency of communication are highly
recommended so that all parties involved understand parameters. This relationship is
unavoidable so aspirants should seek information about board politics, political agendas,
and former practices prior to accepting a job so that issues may be prevented.

Barriers to Success

Barriers to success were expressed by all of the participants in the study, non-
superintendents and superintendents alike. However, superintendents seemed to have
experienced more overt forms of discrimination once they were superintendent
candidates and later, superintendents. Discrimination due to gender and/or race and the
lack of mobility proved to be the biggest barriers to this group's success.

Gender and race. All of the study participants were self aware and very
cognizant of the differences regarding how they were treated compared to someone of
another gender or race. This hypersensitivity is something that minorities must possess in
order to be able to operate in a double consciousness, as an outsider within (Collins,

1989). Black individuals must be aware of others' perceptions of them in order to understand when to address situations of racism and when to take advantage of available opportunities to advance themselves professionally. To be the most successful, black people must learn how to influence others and not allow their emotions to control or derail them (Dickens & Dickens, 1991). The study participants shared numerous examples of bias and oppression that was due to gender and/or race. Each participant was successful because she chose how to counteract those barriers and how to succeed despite of other's perception of them. Anticipating barriers was a strategy that allowed participants to devise contingency plans that proved to be proactive and effective.

As a group, the superintendents' experiences with discrimination based on race and/or gender appeared more overt than the discriminatory experiences shared by the district leaders. Specific issues for the superintendents included unequal financial compensation and even the instance of one superintendent's husband being invited into an interview for her superintendency. According to the district leaders, their experiences of discrimination were usually subtle, such as the requirement to have work pre-approved by a superior more frequently than was required of their non-minority predecessors or experiences in which someone expressed admiration for their ability to articulate their thoughts effectively (instead of that being the assumption due to their obvious professional accomplishments and credentialing). The discrimination was prevalent throughout but seemed to escalate as the position rose higher up the scale of power and influence.

Twenty five percent of women included in The Women in the Workplace study, conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co. summarized in the Women in the Workplace Journal Report in The Wall Street Journal (2015), felt that gender bias was a barrier to their professional progress and the "perception grows more acute once women reach senior levels" (Waller & Lublin, 2015, p. R1). Within the study, the "executive suite" of the 118 companies participating only included seventeen percent women (Waller & Lublin, 2015, p. R1). This finding is directly comparable to the low representation of women in the superintendency. The stagnancy of women in positions leading up to the superintendency is also reflected in corporate America and is called the "frozen middle" by Stanford university professor Shelley Correll (Waller & Lublin, 2015, p. R2) which is explained by the belief of a third of men and women who shared that the advancement of women was not a priority of their direct bosses. This bias is a reality and more studies and research is needed in order to address this inequity.

Requirement to be the best. All of the participants, non-superintendent and superintendent, felt the need to be the best. If not focused on being the best, they knew or believed that they would not achieve their goals. The Evaluator eloquently explained the "curve" that white men experience, a phenomenon more widely accepted as white privilege. In the 1991 study of black managers, it was found that blacks in management found the need to operate differently and to a higher degree than whites in order to be successful (Dickens & Dickens, 1991). The curve of white privilege is often blind to those who benefit, but those who lack said privilege always acknowledge it. While we openly acknowledge barriers to professional success among ourselves, as black women

we know that sharing details about our experiences of oppression and our concerns about

other controversial topics would not only hurt the district leader, but also the careers of

other black women coming after us.

> Making mistakes or failing is not an option for black managers. When a white
> person fails, the failure reflects on that person. When a black person fails, that
> person fails for the group. Every black failure reinforces the expectations of the
> white system. (Dickens & Dickens, 1991, p. 33)

We African American females do not readily recover from such slippages due to our

obvious lack of privilege, or the "curve."

Mobility. Study participants cited lack of mobility, or relocating for career

advancement, as a barrier that is more pronounced among women due to the assumption

that the male is or would be the breadwinner. Mobility increases the marketability of a

superintendent candidate but that ability is greatly tied to the flexibility of one's family

structure. Consequently, of the 13 study participants, only three had school-age children.

Of the three participants with school-age children, only one remained mobile and despite

her willingness to move for a position, she (The Mover) shared that she had chosen to

decline other job opportunities due to the impact that relocating would have on her

family. Lack of mobility does not prevent a person from being a superintendent but it

does impact the amount of available options.

As a personal example, I moved to a different state for a high school

principalship. This mobility was made possible by my unmarried status and the fact that

I had not yet birthed children. Due to my upcoming marriage, I soon must seek

comparable employment within a commutable distance from my new home with my

future husband. While my professional resume will increase my search success, my geographical limitations will still confine my potential opportunities for employment in my field. I have chosen family over career ascension but it was definitely an either or choice in regards to which would be more important.

Having a healthy family life and an upwardly mobile career is a desire of many; however, African American female district leaders typically chose to limit mobility for the comfort of their families. Family enhances the quality of life while also limiting the available job opportunities that one can seek due to proximity. This concession often meant forgoing the superintendency or delaying the superintendency until children were adults or husband was more mobile.

Networking: Lack of networks. As superintendents, African American females represent double minorities (race and gender) and, thus, are often outsiders within superintendent circles. While networking is not solely based on race and gender, this study shows that African American women feel that their experiences in the superintendency are unlike those of individuals of another race and/or gender. The scarcity of African American female superintendents makes it difficult to find and network with others who share similar backgrounds as well as direct experiences related to obstacles surrounding race and gender. The lack of an actively supportive network has a direct correlation to job satisfaction. On this point, those participants who spoke of having more connections and participating in networks also shared their desire to continue in their current roles. District leaders (non-superintendent) did not appear to lack in professional networks and this marked a major difference between the two groups.

Non-superintendent district leaders need to maintain networks as they matriculate higher up into school district leadership so that networks and the support that they offer persist beyond the promotion.

Support Systems

 Networks. Many African Americans believe that a necessary work product, concerning employment and career advancement, should be one's resume. While the importance of a solid resume cannot be understated, if it goes unnoticed, it may still prove futile in terms of obtaining one's desired goal. Apart from the resume, there is great power in connecting with mentors and networks. A network of trusted colleagues can assist in providing the professional resources and emotional support needed to weather the journey to promotion within any professional field. Non-superintendent participants shared more information regarding networks that supported their career development and success. However, there was a definite decrease in the presence of networks as one moved into the superintendency. Participation in networks was prevalent among a couple of the superintendents in this study and seemed to have a direct correlation with job satisfaction. Because the superintendency is believed to be the loneliest of all educational leadership positions, the need for adequate networking opportunities is great.

 Mentors. Mentoring appeared to be a passive experience in which most of the district leaders participated despite the fact that they did not seek out their mentors. Due to the unintentional act of being a mentee, I believe there is a correlation between actively seeking mentoring as a district leader and one's desire to become a superintendent.

While I know they were interested, due to their level of interest in the study findings of this dissertation, I do not believe all the district leaders knew how to seek out mentors for a desired superintendency. Consequently, the only district leader who appeared to intentionally seek out mentors, based on the skills needed to further her skill set, was the Evaluator. She described her mentors in terms of their attributes and qualities rather than simply the experience of being shoulder tapped or sponsored by a supervisor/mentor. She was also the only district leader who was still seeking mentoring. She shared that she was unsure if she desired the superintendency, but her intentionality led me to believe that she will seek a superintendency and is waiting for the timing and opportunity to align.

Most of the superintendents shared that they had not originally aimed to be superintendents but were, in fact, led and pushed by individuals who they considered to be mentors. On their way to the superintendency, this mentoring process increased the women's confidence levels because their mentors offered insight and advice on possible factors or behaviors that could have led to the derailment of their career advancement plans. The superintendents stated that most of their mentors were male, to be expected due to the heavily weighted male presence in educational leadership. Mentoring led most of these women to the superintendency and the lack of available mentoring is thus unavoidably linked to the shortage of African American female superintendents. If more superintendents are needed, mentoring needs to increase. Corporations often set up formal mentoring and coaching programs for their employees. This is not normally the case within education and would explain the lack of a steady pipeline of ready talent in

education and, especially, with regard to the superintendency. On this point, the overall consensus among the superintendents was that without the mentoring, their careers in education would have undoubtedly been different. While the impact of mentoring is undeniably paramount in the successful attainment of the superintendency, it was not the focal point of the study because the importance of mentoring was not new knowledge to regarding career development or career progression. The focus and outcome of mentoring on black women is a topic that required more attention and detail.

Mentoring others. One glaring omission from the discussion of mentoring and the importance of support systems among the district leaders was the commitment to supporting African American females, specifically, in their quests to advance in district level leadership and, even, to the superintendency. In other words, after speaking about the profound impact of mentoring on their own careers and the many barriers that African American women have faced and continue to face, only one participant spoke directly to mentoring African American women. The Crusader, in particular, connected the barriers to professional advancement experienced by the majority of African American women in education with the need for African American women to intentionally support and assist one another. On a similar note, The Climber was the one superintendent who spoke of intentionally investing in the career development of African Americans. While some of the other district leaders mentioned mentoring African American women, they did not do so intentionally or without relation to a pre-existing reason such as succession planning or as a supervisor.

Interestingly, all of the superintendents shared personal advice with me; advice that I internalized (in my researcher role and as an aspirant to the superintendency) as positive mentoring that would serve my own career plans. Some offered their views regarding my impending marriage and the impact of my career on that relationship. Some spoke about my appearance and community fit. One of the superintendents consistently encouraged me to finish my dissertation, and another strongly suggested certain professional readings and trainings. These superintendents mentor others because they were mentored, and they see the importance of guiding others so that success will be more likely. At the same time, only one superintendent mentioned being intentional about mentoring African American females, once again a surprising revelation considering the comfort levels displayed by all the participants throughout the interviewing/sharing process, as well as the de facto mentoring of myself throughout this process. All of these women risked their careers and reputations to assist me in finishing my dissertation by sharing their personal information and experiences for this study; a study that, ultimately, will culminate in the doctoral degree, thereby providing me the credential to be a superintendent, should I choose to do so.

Supportive families and husbands. Before undertaking and completing this study, I assumed that participants would value professional mentoring and networking over personal support systems. The outcomes of the study proved to be actually quite different from my earlier assumptions. All of the participants credited their personal support systems with allowing them to maintain their identities and their emotional well being once the positions were achieved. Both professional and personal support systems

were greatly needed in order to achieve and maintain successful district level leadership positions.

The support of a marriage and family served as a balancing factor that added to the superintendents' emotional well-being. Considering the stress and hardships that come along with the superintendency, it seems difficult to successfully be a superintendent without the support of a family. Coincidentally, all of the superintendents included in this study were married and they seemed to value their husbands' companionship over friendships and social circles. Moreover, one of the superintendents shared that friends are difficult to trust once one becomes a superintendent.

Summary of Study Findings

A superintendent is a district leader, but more importantly she is the singular leader of a public school system comprised of teachers, students, staff members, administrators, and other district leaders. As such, the superintendent has attained the pinnacle position in public schooling through which she leads the direction of an entire school district with her decisions. As superintendents, the women who comprised Group Two in this study have weathered experiences that few others can say they have had. They are both politicians and educators—two words that seemingly represent contradictory philosophies and priorities, and yet they make it work.

One commonality of all of the superintendents was the existence of a supportive husband. While this loving relationship accompanied responsibilities that sometimes conflicted with the career progression or opportunities, it was the one relationship that every superintendent depended on to support her throughout her career. I embarked upon

this study believing that the participants would stress the importance of mentoring. Mentoring was included but it was surpassed by the need to have the personal and genuine support of someone who cared for them as a person beyond the position of superintendent. Ultimately, the biggest surprise and learning outcome was the power of a strong personal support system. This support system is often in the form of a spouse but could also be in the form of biological family members and support circles. The personal support system maintained the personal identity of the black woman beyond the superintendent.

To summarize this section, study findings indicate that the similarities shared by the group of superintendents, in particular, serve as a roadmap and crosswalk for aspiring superintendents. By virtue of being an African American female leading a school district, there are enormous rewards to be gained as a result of overcoming the barriers and obstacles that litter the journey to the superintendency. This qualitative study is not, and may never be, complete due to the reality of changes that occur within society and school politics over time. However, I believe that this study will assist those individuals, especially African American females, who are interested in making education better by leading school districts; this study provides knowledge about trends and other's experiences, making aspirants more likely to be successful in their search for a district level leadership position or superintendency despite the barriers that they will encounter.

Implications for Practice

Many lessons can be gleaned from the women who have persevered to reach the position of school district leader or superintendent. While these lessons may fit aspiring

superintendents of any gender and/or race, the study itself was designed with the intended audience of African American females and those desiring to assist in their development.

Practitioners and Job Candidates

Research, research, research. All African American women seeking a superintendency should research the roles, responsibilities, and research/case studies pertaining to experienced practitioners (current and former). The superintendency is attainable. However, it is more likely attainable for African American women located in communities with a minority and impoverished demographic and in which they have established a credible work history. Aspirants to the superintendency need to understand the ways in which this position will impact the quality of their lives, so decisions about concessions for friends, family, and flexibility/mobility must be considered with careful deliberation.

Support systems are needed and vital to anyone seeking to be a leader within a school district. It is doubly important for African American females who, as evidenced by the findings of this study, need and benefit from professional mentors and networks. Family and friend support systems serve as important resources for maintaining a healthy emotional mindset throughout the career advancement process.

All of the women who participated in healthy and active networks spoke of the benefits but also addressed the task of maintaining their networks through planned activities that included lunch gatherings, phone calls, sitting together at superintendent events and conversing amongst themselves about topics that are shared that only they would experience. Networking is a skill that can have a positive effect on job

performance and satisfaction. This skill is not natural for all and should be cultivated like any other skill that is desired in people. During the study, it often crossed my mind what a meeting of all of these highly successful, professional African American superintendents would look like and how it could be orchestrated. I suggest that the positive effects would be endless for the participants as well as for their respective school district, due to the establishment of a professional learning community in which they can mutually contribute and benefit.

Sheryl Sandberg, Founder of LeanIn.Org and Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Inc., shared that The Women in the Workplace study also found that peer support circles or groups can counteract the lack of mentoring and sponsoring occurring for women. Of the companies supporting peer circles, "83 percent of members say they are more likely to tackle a new challenge or opportunity as a result of the support their Circle provides" (p. R3). This speaks heavily to practitioners who may struggle with seeking mentors or sponsors. Peer support groups can assist in career advancement despite the obstacles that exist for women and thus should be sought out by black women seeking executive leadership within school districts.

Gatekeepers, Employers of Senior Educational Staff, and Superintendents

States should establish a regular schedule of networking sessions that would require all sitting superintendents to network with each other. Further, veteran superintendents should be assigned to mentor novice superintendents for three to five years. If longevity is an issue for certain districts, national networks may be needed to pair novice superintendents with veteran mentors so that careers will be longer and more

successful. In order to deepen the applicant pool for superintendents, cohorts of district

leaders should be cultivated formally within districts and states. This is especially

necessary for those applicants who may face additional barriers due to race, gender,

sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and/or cultural upbringing. If more

superintendents are needed to fill vacancies, aspirants to the superintendency should be

intentionally developed, as were many of the superintendents included in this study.

The Women in the Workplace study conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey &

Co. summarized in the Women in the Workplace Journal Report in The Wall Street

Journal (2015) found that a company that reported a "women's surge" in which

> Managers must consider women which filling open positions at the vice-president
> level and above; examine salaries for every role in the company to ensure women
> and men are paid equally; and ensure that women make up at least 30% of
> attendees at management summits or onstage roles at keynote presentations.
> (Waller & Lublin, 2015, p. R2)

School systems and educational agencies responsible for hiring and training educational

leaders should be concerned by the discrepancy evident in the hiring of male and female

superintendents. In order to intentionally address this problem, explicit targets and goals

regarding increasing access for women should be erected so that parties responsible

(including search firms and recruiters) are held accountable. In the words of a former

supervisor, "people respect what we inspect." In the article, *More Firms Say Targets Are*

the Key to Diversity, it was shared that some corporate companies are implementing a

controversial practice of setting diversity metric targets (including the hiring of women)

and tying those targets to the pay and performance of executives to ensure that diversity

is a priority. Sandra Peterson, Chairman of Johnson & Johnson, stated that the practice, though controversial, is not discriminatory but it is "holding people accountable to improving those numbers" (Feintzeig, 2015, p. R3). If access to district level leadership and the superintendency is to be actualized by under-represented groups (women and minorities), explicit priorities and expectations must be communicated and monitored.

In addition to monitoring the diversity of applicants, black women who are in positions of authority must also play a part in the equitable access for black women to upper ranks of education. The article *What's Holding Women Back in the Workplace?* delineates the outcomes of sponsorship and mentorship by stating, "Sponsors are senior players who open the doors to promotions and push their protégé through. By contrast, mentors typically offer informal advice" (Waller & Lublin, 2015, p. R2). This sponsorship or shoulder tapping is hugely impactful for the careers of those being sponsored. Consequently, "White men, who dominate corporate leadership roles, tend to seek out other white men to sponsor. Meanwhile, women of color in leadership roles often shy away from sponsoring junior talent to avoid accusations of favoritism" (Gellman, 2015, p. R2, *Exploring the Racial Gap*). Black women in leadership roles must exercise their power and create more access for black women through explicit sponsorships or shoulder taps and accept that the practice is equitable and assists in counteracting the double whammy of being a black woman. For a black woman in leadership to fail to intentionally increase access for qualified black women is just as, if not more, detrimental to the progression of black women than if that oversight was carried out by someone of a different race or gender. Black women are aware of the

impact of mentoring and sponsorship and therefore the lack of action is not happenstance but rather neglect. If we do not remove the barriers that someone else removed for us, who will?

School districts should no longer blindly trust search companies or other gatekeepers with creating a pool of credentialed candidates for the superintendency. Instead, school district administrators should require a diverse applicant pool and request to read through all applications that meet the specified qualifications.

University Preparation Programs

Studies have shown that aspiring superintendents are obtaining superintendent licensure at astronomical rates. Since this regularly involves enrollment in university educational leadership programs, the university's role in increasing access to the superintendency is great. Universities should intentionally include a variety of readings and studies that directly address the superintendency and the various issues that surround the position. Further, educational leadership programs should expose students to current research based on the student's characteristics and other trends applicable to their desired position. Finally, universities should actively connect their students, as aspiring district leaders and superintendents, with mentors and create networks while they have a captive audience.

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Limitations of this Study

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A qualitative study for dissertation purposes poses a number of strengths and challenges. The end product, resulting in a novice piece of research presented in the form of a defended dissertation, involved obvious challenges with time frames. The

participants in this study were the busiest of all school leaders and were only available for fragmented amounts of time. Most interviews took place within two hours, a limitation that prevented the strong establishment of relationship bonds that may have yielded more in-depth data.

The scarcity of African American school district leaders, along with the political implications surrounding issues of racism and sexism, was definitely a barrier in presenting the data in its totality. The participant's identities needed to be concealed and, thus, geographical and regional impact remains unknown to the reader, a limitation that I put into place so that participants' careers would not be jeopardized. Furthermore, as the researcher, while I initially wanted to plan a panel discussion among study participants to facilitate mentorship practices and networking activities, I did not do so because I knew that a panel discussion would have eliminated anonymity and posed a risk to participants. The sensitivity of their experiences, along with the potential notoriety of public identification, limited what participants could freely disclose and what had to be censored from transcripts. Overall, participants were very open despite the issues discussed.

Suggestions for Further Study

Studies will always remain unfinished due to the vast number of additional areas of further study available about the superintendency and school district leadership as it specifically pertains to the inclusion of African American females.

One major contradiction that emerged in this study was the prevalence of homegrown superintendents. Although research shows that most superintendents (66%) are not promoted within (Kowalski et al., 2011), it was not the case among this study's

participants. Rather, their pattern of promotion from within permeated the study by half

of the included superintendents. This pattern suggests one area of further study. Why are

larger, urban districts more likely to hire African American superintendents? Is there a

correlation between their success and their homegrown status?

Additional study into gatekeepers, search firms, and school boards would provide

expanded topics or areas that would benefit from continuing research. Is the shallow

superintendent pool due to a lack of applicants or due to narrow and ultra-specific criteria

to which school boards subscribe when choosing superintendents? If diversity is sought,

data shows that capable and qualified applicants exist and are ready for the challenge.

While there is an obvious barrier for seeking career advancement due to family

responsibilities for African American women, the Women in the Workplace Journal

Report in The Wall Street Journal (2015) found that "even women without children cite

stress and pressure as their main issue (for being less interested in the top executive

position). This points to another possible explanation for the leadership ambition gap:

The path to senior positions is disproportionately stressful for women" (Sandberg, 2015,

p. R3). The effect of the perceived stress and pressure levels in leadership positions and

the effect of "today's always-on 24/7 work culture" (Barton, 2015, p. R5) on those

qualified to seek those positions is another opportunity for further research for those

seeking to understand the lack of desire for the superintendency.

Lastly but not least, an exploration of the dismissals/resignations of several

African American female superintendents, including an investigation of the

circumstances surrounding the dismissals/resignations and their impact on the appeal of

the superintendency for African American women, presents an opportunity for further study. Is the sudden surge of public conflict surrounding African American female superintendents due to discrimination? Are there political implications stemming from the targeted superintendents being identified as both black and female, or is it a coincidence? Has this affected the view of the superintendency for those who are moving up towards that seat?

Conclusion of the Study

Any position of leadership represents a rewarding and challenging task, as well as a personal calling. School district leadership is particularly important work because it informs the opportunities that children have to achieve their dreams and unlock the possibilities of their futures. This study on African American female school district leaders and superintendents exposes the joys and challenges of their work when the calling to lead is complicated with discriminatory practices and behaviors, along with political and social barriers, that often have nothing to do with children. These women have committed their lives to improving school districts and, admirably, have made the obstacles seem small compared to their determination and will to succeed. I have shared the stories of thirteen remarkable women who have inspired me to continue to strive for excellence in education, and their stories will continue to inspire many more to come.

All study participants stressed that being an African American female was an obstacle in terms of advancing to district level leadership, but one that could be overcome by being the best at their careers and making sure that they stood out and above all other competition. At the same time, the women acknowledged that stereotypes and

perceptions of African American females in leadership still pose a major problem when seeking to lead, even with resumes and professional experiences documented as superior to most. For instance, their resumes often included evidence of situations in which they were able to achieve more with fewer resources, along with documentation of extensive educational experience in the classroom and throughout different levels of district support services. The district leaders and superintendents were, in fact, the best in school leadership, and their achievements confirmed such. Paraphrasing one participant's observations, black women are not graded on a proverbial curve and, thus, must earn every accolade and promotion, a reality that forces them to be the best in order to have reached these positions of leadership and power.

Lastly but not least, all of the superintendents were married. All spoke of the emotional support that their spouses provided, support that was needed in order to continue in their professional roles. All of the leaders pointed to support systems that assisted them in withstanding society's traditional ideas about wifely and motherly duties, including feedback and sounding boards within their political landscapes and relationships that went beyond their professions and gave them core support. All of the participants acknowledged the enormous amount of stress that comes along with the responsibilities of the superintendency, how they navigate these responsibilities, and how their support systems have been able to keep them going through it all.

It is clear that the road to the superintendency, as well as to other executive positions within district level leadership, is different for every person. The double whammy of being both black and female, however, created similar experiences that were

shared among all the study participants; experiences that are particularly unique to African American females navigating the world of educational leadership. The barriers for African American females seeking to lead school districts persist to exist and needs to first be recognized by society before it can be addressed.

This study features data to support the existence of inequities that continue to perpetuate the glass ceiling with African American females. While a progressive society needs women to serve in leadership capacities of today and tomorrow, society has failed to adjust gendered perceptions that make leadership and life as a woman (particularly a wife and mother) difficult to accomplish simultaneously. This conflict of having it all makes me think of the Judy Brady's (1972) essay "Why I Want a Wife." The 1972 essay was published more than 40 years ago and the unfair expectations for a woman to be all things: wife, mother, professional still persist today. I, too, as an aspiring superintendent struggle with my career desires and my desire to also be a wife, mother, and happy woman-thus having it all. This is not a struggle that is commonly shared with men but it was shared with all of this study's participants. That struggle is our reality and our truth. As long as that conflict exists between society's expectations of a woman at home with the professional demands of a progressing career compounded by the oppressions of racism, the playing field will continue to be uneven and African American women will continue to have to overcome in order to have it all. This study is just a step in identifying some of the issues. Now, action and policies must be used to dismantle a system that has remained unfair and biased against women, especially African American women.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: African American Female School District Leaders; Their Careers as Mentees and as Mentors

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable): <u>Ashauna Short and Dr. Carl Lashley</u>

Participant's Name: <u>   </u>

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future.   There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researcher named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?
This is a research study to learn about the characteristics and experiences that lead to women successfully obtaining district level leadership positions in educational leadership. This research is being conducted as a part of my program as a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to not participate in this study, or end your participation at any time during the process.

Why are you asking me?
You are invited to participate because you are one of few black women who meet all of the usual qualifications for the superintendency, such as principal experience and having obtained a doctoral degree, and who has successful achieved a school district-level leadership that may lead to the superintendency. The scarcity of possible participants is true nation-wide and thus creates a lack of available mentors who resemble like each other (black and female).

Due to the highly political nature of the position, "outsiders" are not typically granted access so you were selected and introduced by a shared associate, which is termed "snowballing". The All participants are within a three-hour driving distance of my current residence in order to allow for ready access.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?
All interviews will be audiotaped using a digital recorder and /or iPad and later transcribed. As part of your participation in this study, I will spend time interviewing you at the time and place of your choosing. For this study, I will interview two to four times so that the time commitment is not overwhelming or inconvenient. Interviewing may take up to two hours, depending on your availability. The time commitment is the greatest inconvenience in this study, which is why several follow-up sessions are available. Shorter interviews will call for more follow-up interview sessions.

You may decide to not participate in this study, or end your participation at any time during the process. If you decide to not participate or end your participation, your decision will not affect any future contact you have with the University of North Carolina at Greensboro or myself.

Is there any audio/video recording?
In order to ensure accuracy and the correct sharing of your words and experiences, audio recording is required. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

What are the risks to me?
The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. The minimal risk associated with this study is the possibility of one's identity being discovered. Precautions to reduce the likelihood of this risk occurring include: your information will be coded with a different name so that your identity can remain confidential for additional security; all data will be secured by a passcode; all audio of the interview and notes from the observation will be destroyed at the conclusion of this study; and the geographical location of the study and participants will not be included in the study as it would provide information that would allow participants to possibly be identified.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Ashauna Short (principal investigator) via phone at (336) 669-8017 or email at ashaunashort@gmail.com AND/OR Dr. Carl Lashley (faculty advisor) via phone at (336) 549-9163 or email at carl.lashley@gmail.com.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?
I am requesting your participation because I believe your career success in Education Leadership may offer some insight into district level leadership positions in educational leadership and the practices that one might undertake to accomplish this goal. The lack of research on black female school district leaders and the discouraging available research that sights the scarcity of those reaching this pinnacle position make it less desirable for other rising education leaders who are black females. This study may benefit you by revealing some practices that you can use to mentor and/or sponsor other aspiring school district leaders. Due to the scarcity of research on this topic, it is difficult for aspiring black female school leaders to find a mentor who has overcome the obstacles and barriers that are specific to black women. This study may serve as a resource and de facto mentor for black women aspiring to reach school district leadership and beyond, whether or not they have access to mentoring or meaningful networking.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?
There are no direct benefits for taking part in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?
Your information will be coded with a different name so that your identity can remain confidential for additional security; all data will be secured by a passcode on my home computer that is not accessible to anyone other than myself; all audio of the interview and notes from the observation will be destroyed at the conclusion of this study; and the geographical location of the study and participants will not be included in the study as it would provide information that would allow participants to possibly be identified. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. A master list will be stored in a password-protected Google Drive and in a password-protected mobile phone file so that it remains separate from data.

What if I want to leave the study?
You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data, which has been collected, be destroyed unless it is in a de-

identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Ashauna Short.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Lead In: I am interested in the experiences and perceptions of black women who qualify for the superintendency/or who have obtained the superintendency. Given that, please begin with sharing your background and the progression of your professional journey.

My primary research questions are:

1. What are the driving forces behind black female professionals pursuing district level leadership and/or the superintendency?

2. What career paths or experiences lead or led to district level leadership for black women?

Interview Questions

1. How did you become involved in the work that you do?

2. Take me back to the moment when you decided that you wanted to lead schools and potentially a school district?

3. What experiences helped prepare you for the superintendency?

4. What people may have prepared you for the superintendency? What impact did they have on your career trajectory? Have you, in turn, helped prepare anyone else for the superintendency?

5. Patricia Hill-Collins shared that "one danger facing African American women intellectuals working in these new locations (desegregated opportunities) concerns the potential isolation of individual thinkers from Black women's

collective experiences—lack of access to other US. Black women and to Black women's communities. Another is the pressure to separate thought from action—particularly political activism . . ." (Collins, 2009, p. 45). Have you experienced either of these pressures? How has it affected you and your practices?

6. What advice would you give to women who wish to be in district level leadership?

7. Why do you believe there are less than 20% of female superintendents and less than 3% Black female superintendents?

8. Lorraine Hansberry (1969) observed, "Eventually it comes to you, the things that makes you exceptional, if you are at all, is inevitably that which must also make you lonely" (p. 148, as cited in Collins, 2002, p. 287). What strategies or practices do you engage with that remedy this from occurring? (Professionally and personally)

9. Can you talk to me about any experiences of discrimination and/or barriers you faced? Talk to me about any times you felt you were treated differently (than a man or person of a different race might have been).

10. According to Patricia Hill-Collins, one of the foremost intellectuals and academics on Black Feminist Thought and Epistemology, "standpoints refer to group knowledge, recurring patterns of differential treatment . . . suggest that certain themes will characterize U.S. Black women's group knowledge or

standpoint" (Collins, 2009, p. 29). What standpoints exist for most Black women superintendents? Give an example or share an experience.

11. Do you feel these standpoints transcend your status or intellectualism?

12. Many Black women academics struggle to find ways to do intellectual work that challenges injustice. Have you had any struggles with this while seeking to still be promoted and marketable? Did this impact your dissertation in any way?

13. Is there anything else that you would like to contribute that would help me understand the role and experiences of black women in district level leadership?

14. Are there any other questions you think I should ask other women I interview?

APPENDIX C

SUPERINTENDENT AND DISTRICT LEADER CODING

Superintendent Coding

Route to Superintendency	Politics	Networking	Balance	Mentors	Mentoring Others	Discrimination	Family
Shoulder Tap	Board Politics	Difficulty	Outlets	Negative Mentors	Pulling along other black women	Careful Speech	Effect of Marriage (Partner)
Importance of Timing	Make-up	Loneliness	Self-Care	Scarcity of mentors for current supers		Look of the Superintendent	Children in marriage
Lack of desire for the Superintendency in the beginning (appeal)	Community Demographics and fit	Lack of Superintendent Networks	Tried and true friendships	Male Mentors		Ability Doubted (Credibility)	Family Support
Valuable Experiences (Pipeline)	Negativity endured	Network Groups (Formal)	Staying True to Self	Mentor Seeking		Stereotypes (awareness of them too)	Mobility
Were Recruited	Strategies: Use data to prove point, train board PD		Self-Awareness			Race vs. Gender	Long-Distance Marriage
Formal Superintendent Preparation	Backstabbing					Fight/Struggle never ends	Late Marriage

Route to Superintendency	Politics	Networking	Balance	Mentors	Mentoring Others	Discrimination	Family
Motivation: Called to Education	Advocacy Required					Ready to move on (job dissatisfaction)-POLITICS?	Family is a Package (decisions)
Credentials very important	Contract Design and contents						Reversed role in marriage
Must be over-prepared							Parent care
Research the job (pick carefully, impossible job)							Make Husband a Priority
Named and prepped as successor/home grown							Womanly duties at home

District Leader Coding

Route to District Leadership and beyond	Politics	Networking vs. Competition	Balance	Mentors	Mentoring Others	Barriers	Flexibility and Support	Motivating Factors
	Demographic/ fit of community; Desire to affect the black community; Community expectations; Appearance (hair, overall look, hue of skin)	Built family at work	Stay true to self	Role Models but not supers as BW	Need to help other BW	Barriers are strengths for black women	Supportive husbands (long distance marriage)	New challenge wanted
Shoulder Tap		Lacks because of competition for same jobs	Time management required to be a parent too	Supervisors as mentors	Unintentionally mentors others- does not seek them out	Ageism/too young	Mobile husbands	Motivation-DN tell what can't do
No longer desires super (comfort in classroom, does not desire networking and politics)		Higher up, less honesty	Shopping	Ex-husband	Mentored several people to administrative positions	Must go above and beyond to overcome racial barriers; be the best	Grown kids	Competitive edge
Seeking super (prepared by previous leadership positions in central office)	Surround yourself with people that you can trust	Very few BW the higher up you go	Friends from past (inner circle)	Parents	Mentors the superintendent because of age- freedom to be honest	Low expectations due to race	Stepped back for husband's career	Always knew she would teach; Wanted to help others; improve minority lives

Route to District Leadership and beyond	Politics	Networking vs. Competition	Balance	Mentors	Mentoring Others	Barriers	Flexibility and Support	Motivating Factors
Approaching retirement reason for no super	Analyze what's in it for them and me with district politics	Time for kids vs. networking	Social life-social groups, sororities	Been mentored in the past	Mentoring successor	Male leaders want to be surrounded by other males	School-age children deters super because of mommy duties	
Exposure to other facets in education increased desire	Look out for yourself	Relationships are important	Exercise as a stress-reliever	Due to age, networking and trusted professional collegial sharing more than mentoring (includes direct reports)	Sought out by others because of years of experience		Not interested in moving family for job	Spiritual calling
Principalship prepared the most; counseling experience	No privacy—decreases desire for superintendency; Desire for family and life deters super		Prayer life needed;	Retired principal who visited 1X monthly for 3 years-support	Promoting others (more than mentoring)		Single-parenthood (barrier)& upper level	Unsure about future aspirations
Super prep program	Techniques: questioning= diplomacy and challenges status quo		Two sides of self	Chosen based on areas of needed growth	Mentoring others based on experiences (jobs, doctoral degree completion)		Support system needed to have kids	

Route to District Leadership and beyond	Politics	Networking vs. Competition	Balance	Mentors	Mentoring Others	Barriers	Flexibility and Support	Motivating Factors
Corporate career start (funded degree, established high expectations)	School boards want men but BW get the toughest assignments for superintendency						Have family time and time with kids	
Be good at current job							Career determines kids (no room, still deciding)	
							Willing to Relocate for a new job	