A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

by

Latoia Aster Valentine

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. The theory guiding this study was Collins' black feminist thought, as it clarifies and calls attention to the analysis of ideas and experiences specific to African American women, which relates to African American women superintendents in North Carolina. The central question of the study is "How do African American women describe their lived experiences in superintendent positions in the state of North Carolina?" This qualitative phenomenological study included six current and/or past African American women North Carolina superintendents. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews, an online focus group, and a writing prompt providing advice to aspiring superintendents. Data analysis involved the coding of themes gleaned from interviews, an online focus group, writing prompts, and lived experiences shared by participants. The findings of this study suggest a number of preparation steps based on the review of the literature and the results of this study. Preparation, including diversifying learning opportunities and the acquisition of a doctorate degree, are recommended by the study. Other preparation suggestions urge women to get support systems and a mentor. Participants expressed the importance of participating in experiences that will provide exposure to the superintendency.

Keywords: African American, Black feminist thought, superintendents, female superintendents, leadership, women superintendents

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Dedication

This doctoral dissertation is dedicated to my family. My children, Laila and Brian, have given me quiet time to complete coursework, study, research, and write. They definitely sacrificed some of their "mommy time" for this work and I appreciate them. My husband, Brian, has been a good provider and supporter of my lifelong learning. My mother, Drucilla, has allowed me to scream and cry on her shoulder. She was also consistently there for my children while I worked and attended class. To my friends in the field of education, thank you for your constant encouragement, dissertation memes, and inspirational phone calls and text messages. To the women who participated in my study, I understand the struggle of finding meaning and purpose in your life. You each inspire me to continue to work for African American women and our rights. Thank you for your courage and your resiliency in the changing field of education.

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I would like to first acknowledge God. God said, “Latoia don’t talk yourself out of your dreams.” There were so many times I wanted to stop, to give up, to quit. I had writer’s block and I was unmotivated. My dear friend Rhonda Daye would tell me, “God didn’t bring you this far to leave you. You may have big obstacles, but we serve a big God. Your enemies may be powerful, but our God is all-powerful. You may not have the connections, the resources or the talent, but God can do the impossible.” I have to acknowledge Rhonda for her consistent and constant encouragement.

I would also like to acknowledge my former professor and mentor, Dr. Laurell Malone. She always encouraged me to keep learning and to continue to grow to my full potential. Talia Davis, Michelle Chambers, Dr. Katrina Chalwe, Crystal Wiggins, Dr. Hope Sloan, Intisar Hamidullah, and Latoya Woody Smith (Rest in Paradise) are my dear friends who offered motivation, checked on my progress, and always encouraged me.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family. Brian, Laila, Brian Jr, and Mama. You were key to me being able to complete this process. My brothers, Daryl and Alexander, my sisters, Rhonda and Thomasina, thank you. My family has stood by me without question. My family inspires me and brings me infinite joy. Thank you for encouraging me to be all that I can be.

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List of Abbreviations

African American (AA)

American Association of School Administrators (AASA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)

North Carolina (NC)

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)

North Carolina School Superintendents Association (NCSSA)

School Administrators' Association (SAA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Chapter One serves as an introduction to the historical and social experiences faced by African American women superintendents and will explore how these experiences developed during their ascension to positions of superintendency. Chapter One also introduces this study's research design, which is transcendental phenomenology, and reveals the practical, empirical, and theoretical contributions of this study and why it is important to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. The central research question, as well as the sub-questions, are introduced and explained so the experiences of African American women superintendents can be clearly presented. Chapter One concludes by supplying a brief listing of definitions to assist with comprehension of the study.

Background

During her primary election campaign, presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton summarized today's gender challenge by saying:

> It is now unremarkable for a woman to win primary state victories, unremarkable to have a woman in a close race to be our (presidential) nominee, unremarkable to think that a woman can be the President of the United States. And that is truly remarkable. (Clinton, 2008)

Following that precedent, it is no longer remarkable that an African American woman can lead a school district, however, it is considerably remarkable that African American women superintendents remain underrepresented though they hold the highest percentage of doctorates

awarded to African Americans and the highest percentage of doctorates awarded in education (Robinson et al., 2017). The few African American women that have served as superintendents report having to constantly prove their capabilities while also disproving negative assumptions, both of which make leading in education administration more difficult (Thomas, 2014).

Historical

Carter G. Woodson's book, *The Education of the Negro*, detailed the history of education for Blacks in America (Woodson, 1998). The majority of the research and literature on the educational experiences of African American women exits in random records and histories, archived papers of African American leaders, biographies, and autobiographies, and other primary and secondary sources (Collier-Thomas, 1982). Details of the experiences of African American women and their impact on pre-Civil War education is scarce, however, parallels can be drawn to the experiences of women as a whole during that period.

In the antebellum South, slave owners were gravely concerned that with education, their slaves would question their circumstances, organize, and eventually rebel against them, hence they were determined to prevent literacy among their slaves. They enacted laws that carried severe penalties for teaching slaves to read, but more compassionate slave owners assumed the risk and taught their slaves to read. Those slaves, specifically women, assumed additional risk and began to teach children to read (Collier-Thomas, 1982). Through dedication and determination, literacy grew among African Americans as they used reading to communicate, share experiences, better their lives, and eventually find their way to the freedom they yearned for (Collier-Thomas, 1982). According to the census of 1850, there were roughly 500,000 free African Americans with a literacy rate of approximately 50% (Sowell, 2001).

Prior to the Civil Rights Era, Anna T. Jeanes, a Quaker, invested one million dollars in the Negro Rural School Fund for the betterment of education for African Americans in rural schools (Faircloth, 2007). The fund provided support for Black master teachers, coining them the Jeanes Supervisors. The Jeanes Supervisors were college educated and they were assigned to southern, mostly rural areas to help improve the educational climate. The Jeanes Supervisors worked under county superintendents, but essentially performed the duties of superintendents within their districts acting as negotiators, crisis handlers, staff developers, personnel directors, attendance officers, enrollment managers, record keepers, and event organizers (Alston, 2005). The Jeanes conducted school and home visits throughout their communities and became important neighborhood advocates, working tirelessly to improve education in their schools and communities, however, with the desegregation of public schools, the initiative for the Jeanes supervisors was also phased out (Alston, 2005; Faircloth, 2007).

There has not been another program comparable to the Jeanes since the Civil Rights Era, and though Tillman and Cochran (2000) reported that administrative leadership programs operate as silent preparation programs due to lack of minority representation that exists in teaching staff, the lack of minority representation in the superintendency cannot be attributed to a lack of preparation (Angel et al., 2013). In fact, African American women are obtaining terminal degrees at an increased rate over other demographics, and women of color comprise a higher percentage of assistant, associate or deputy superintendent positions while holding or working on certification than White women in the same roles (85% versus 73%), making women of color more likely than any other group to be prepared to assume the superintendency (Osler & Webb, 2014; Angel et al., 2013; Brunner & Grogan, 2007). By the time African American women become superintendents, they have more years of experience and education, and very often more

degrees than men, yet, statistics reflect that women of color, specifically African American women, are just not experiencing representational growth in the superintendency (Superville, 2016).

Throughout the history of education, women have historically held a small percentage of superintendent positions. In 1910, about 8.9% of superintendents were women, rising to 10.9% by 1930 (Alston, 2005). Yong-Lynn and Brunner (2009) acknowledged that although greater equality now exists in relation to opportunities for women in educational leadership, a glass ceiling still remains. Although the number of women pursuing educational administration doctoral and master's level programs has surpassed men by more than 50% since 1995 (Björk, 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Muñoz et al., 2014), women have still had fewer opportunities when it comes to leadership positions, even in woman-dominated professions like education (Daily et al., 1999, Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Yong-Lyyun & Brunner, 2009). As recently as 2011, only 24.1% of the nation's superintendents were women (Kowalski et al., 2011), and currently, 21.7% of superintendents are women, a number that is increasing over time (American Association of School Administrators, 2017).

In general, women have seen representational growth in lower- and middle-management positions, but not in upper-management positions in business, politics, academia, and education (Winter, 2016). The most current United States census data indicates that women comprise 51% of the population, 47% of total United States employment, and 51% of all people employed in "management, professional and related occupations", but only 4% of CEOs, 8% of top earners, 17% of board seats, and 14% of executive officers are women (Women in the Labor Force: A Databook, 2013). The American Council on Education finds that women today only represent 5% of the available positions for superintendent, compared to women in business holding 20% of

the available positions for CEO ("The American Council on Education," n.d.). Throughout history the position of superintendent of schools in the United States has been the most male-dominated executive position of any profession (Björk & Keedy, 2001; Sharp et al., 2000), and considering such statistics, the representation of women in academia fails to even meet the proportion of women in the general population (Winter, 2016). After years of study and a call for policy reform in America's workforce, current projections suggest that job growth and earnings for women in the superintendency across the United States will not meet that of their male counterparts for at least another 30 years (Muñoz et al., 2014).

As of 2005, minorities comprised 10.9% of teachers and 12.3% of principals, but only 2.2% of superintendents according to nationwide statistics, so women, and to a greater degree woman of color are gravely underrepresented as superintendents (Alston, 2005). At the time, teaching was considered one of the top seven professions for African American women as they opened their own schools and acted as both teachers and administrators therein, however, Alston (2005) found that of the 15,000 school superintendents, only 2,000 were women. She found that several factors contributed to the decline of African American women in the superintendency: (a) desegregation of public schools, (b) the Vietnam War, and (c) gender and race biases (Alston, 2005).

In 1954, the Supreme Court decided in Brown v. Board of Education that separate and equal was unconstitutional (Alston, 2005). Implemented in the 1960s and 1970s, this historic decision led to the desegregation of schools and the loss of many Black teachers and administrators, both men and women (Alston, 2005). Men and women who were leading and teaching in all-Black schools found very few employment opportunities in the newly integrated schools, and if offered a position, it was almost always a subordinate role (Toppo, 2004). With

husbands deployed to the Vietnam War, more women entered the workforce, however, many gender and race biases existed, and middle-class White women comprised the majority of the women hired (Toppo, 2004). Even then, African American women faced the dual marginality of racism and sexism. Andrews (1993) noted that the "double whammy of race and gender . . . compounded by the attainment of a high level of education, predictably creates problems on both a professional and personal level" (p. 182).

"Shakeshaft and colleagues posited that at the current rate of growth of women in the top position, 'women will not be proportionally represented in the superintendency until the 22nd century'" (Angel et al., 2013, p. 594). Since only 21% of the nation's superintendents are women, and only 2% of those are African American women, it is fair to assume that proportional growth in representation for African American women will take at least as long, if not longer (Angel et al., 2013). In conclusion, though there has been notable progress toward gender inclusion in the superintendency with the number of women superintendents nearly doubling, growth for African American women simply does not compare (Brown, 2014). Much more research and progress is needed before we see adequate representation therein.

Social

Social and economic efforts in the early 1900s separated the experiences of White and African American women. During that era, homemaking, motherhood, and family education were the cornerstones of womanhood (Patterson & Engleberg, 1978); a woman's place was in the home, however, such ideals did not apply across color lines. While White women were able to stay home, African American women moved into the labor force due to their need to help support their families. Patterson and Engleberg (1978) noted that advancements and opportunities for women were a bi-product of an increase in job vacancies based on occupational

growth, turnover, wars, or a deterioration of the job's working conditions and overall attractiveness to men. But even in these instances, African American women were denied factory jobs and any jobs that society deemed acceptable for White women, perpetuating the social stigma that African American women were less valued than White women because they lacked the attributes of true women (Giddings, 1984).

Today, African American women still face similar challenges in the workforce, particularly in careers in educational leadership and school superintendency. African American women face barriers and circumstances that instill skilled leadership ability early in life, described by Alston (2005) as servant leadership/tempered radicalism. Such leadership skills enable African American women to be more persistent, determined, and steadfast, which translates to perseverance in an educational setting. Alston (2005) states African American women superintendents "tend to demonstrate a strong sense of efficacy, dedicate themselves to the care of children and family, practice survival skills, use collaboration that is more relational and consensus building, and believe in God" (p. 681). They are often found in urban school districts, many of which are poorly managed and maintained. He then continues to say that African American women superintendents are caring and that their mission is to "serve, lead, and educate children," comparing them to the Jeanes supervisors who worked tirelessly to improve southern rural schools and communities prior to the Civil Rights Era (p. 682).

Today's African American woman superintendent has been profiled as late 40s or early 50s, with teaching experience totaling 12 to 20 years; she has administrative experience, mostly dealing with people of color, and she dedicates time to church activities outside of school (Alston, 2005). African American women superintendents are unique women in our society.

Forced to navigate both racism and sexism in society, their many life experiences prepare them well for professional leadership roles.

Theoretical

Beverly Guy-Sheftall suggested that living as an African American woman stimulates a Black feminist sensibility that encompasses both experiences and ideas (Collins, 1990). The Collective document was one of the earliest explorations of the intersection of multiple oppressions, including racism and heterosexism. "In contrast to Guy-Sheftall, the Collective placed a stronger emphasis on capitalism as a source of Black women's oppression and on political activism as a distinguishing feature of Black feminism" (Collins, 1990, para. 3). The Combahee River Collective (1982) claims that "as Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic" (p.17). Further, the Collective places more emphasis on capitalism as a source of Black women's oppression and on political activism as a distinguishing feature of Black feminism.

Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist thought reconciled this definitional tension by focusing on "those experiences and ideas shared by African American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society, and theories that interpret these experiences" (Collins, 1990, para. 10), fostering the framework of a distinctive Black feminist consciousness. She insisted that "Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African American women which clarifies a standpoint of, and for, Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (Collins, 1990, para. 10). According to Collins (1990), all African American women share a common experience: the dual marginality of being both black and a woman in a society that actively seeks to oppress and diminish women of African descent.

Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggles: struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed (Cannon, 1985, p. 30 as cited in Collins, 1990). This legacy of struggle can be typified as a form of oppression bell hooks (2004) astutely coined "imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (para. 2). The struggle constitutes one of a series of core themes of Black feminist thought initially recorded by Maria W. Stewart and later advanced by a variety of Black feminist intellectuals. The themes also include the recognition of the intersectionality of race, gender and class oppression, the call for the replacement of denigrated images of Black womanhood with self-defined images, a belief in Black women's activism as mothers, teachers, and Black community leaders, and a sensitivity to sexual politics (Richardson, 1987 as cited in Collins, 1990). It should be noted that although all African American women experience discrimination in the form of imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy and/or racism, social class differences influence how that racism manifests; for instance, middle-class African American women are less likely to experience blatant incidents than working-class African American women, however, the common racist belief that African Americans are less intelligent than Whites remains strong for both groups (Collins, 1990).

Given such a legacy of struggle, it is surprising that little analysis exists on the experiences of African American women in superintendency positions. While there is no shortage of literature surrounding women in school leadership, research highlighting the perspectives of African American women in executive school leadership has been largely neglected (Thomas, 2014). Existing research is mainly gender-based and includes barriers and

challenges experienced by women (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Glass, 2000; Goffney, 2011; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010), characteristics of women who achieve the superintendency (Johnson, 2012; Simpson, 2012), and women's perceptions of the superintendency (Woods, 2009), but it neglects to evaluate the dramatic impact of the intersectionality of race, gender and class oppression for African American women pursuing the superintendency. This lack of research and resources, the lack of representation in the superintendency, and the lack of mentors and sponsors along the road to the superintendency present major impediments for African American women aspiring to the office.

Situation to Self

As a school leader aspiring to become a superintendent, I am currently positioning myself by working as an assistant principal, taking on major leadership roles in my school district, and attaining the proper educational requirements. Thus far, I have advanced to assistant principalship, however, after nine years in this role and many years of study and practice (two masters and an education specialist degree), I am currently experiencing a notable lull in my progress as I have been actively overlooked for promotion for lesser candidates with half my education and a fraction of my experience on multiple occasions. I now fear that my credentials, my goodwill and my support team, though top-notch, may simply not be enough to propel me to superintendency. These experiences have led me to question my surroundings and seek advice and additional resources, ultimately leading me to this study.

The research paradigm of this study is postmodernism. The study will focus on changing the ways of thinking surrounding African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina rather than calling for action (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative results of this study will extend far beyond myself and may impact educational leadership throughout the state of North

Carolina. Qualitative research "should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers' lives" (Creswell, 2013, p. 26). This transcendental phenomenological research will follow the axiological assumption wherein I admit the value-laden nature of the study, and I am transparent concerning my values and biases as well as other information gathered from the field (Creswell, 2013).

I have a host of values and I am very much aware of my biases, some that I battle often, yet they persist. My core values include God, family, hard work, love, kindness, and respect. I have an unwavering faith in education, however, due to personal experience, I am opposed to charter and private schools, but I respect others' rights to choose them. I am also opposed to urban school districts or areas in general; raised in a rural area, I am most comfortable in suburban areas. I am sure that other values and biases will reveal themselves as I delve into the lived experiences of my participants.

Knowledge is power. "The basic tenet of transformative framework is that knowledge is not neutral, and it reflects the power and social relationships within society; and thus the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society" (Mertens as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 26). Knowledge that helps African American women "survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment" is essential (Collins, 2000, p. 31). In conducting this study, I will increase my own understanding of situational challenges to obtaining the superintendency by illuminating the experiences of African American women superintendents that have gone before me, creating an empathetic path to mentorships, and highlighting blind spots within the field of research. Highlighting these three transformative elements may empower myself and other

minority and African American women to attain superintendency, building more inclusive communities of education.

For this study, I have chosen to use the term woman/women over female because referring to a woman by the scientific term female is disparaging, if only because it reduces her to her biological and reproductive makeup. Though it may seem innocuous, the term woman refers specifically to human beings, while the clinical term "female" could refer to any species. By using the term female as a noun, you erase the subject to which you are referring; “the focus shifts away from the personal and onto her qualities as an object—qualities that have, historically, not been used in the best interest of women” (Brown, 2015, para. 9). In order to show women as people and not objects, women and not female will be used throughout this research paper. Brown (2015) explained it well by stating:

> By employing this word that is usually an adjective as a noun, you’re reducing her whole personhood to the confines of that adjective. It’s calling someone “a White” instead of a White person, “a black” instead of a black person, and so on. (para. 10)

Furthermore, referring to a woman as a female is often meant to convey inferiority or contempt (Brown, 2015).

Problem Statement

Though gender inequality in the superintendency is problematic, even more disturbing is the stark underrepresentation of African American women in superintendent roles and the lack of research regarding their absence. Research indicates that being a woman significantly increases the difficulty of achieving the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007), but that challenge is only further compounded for African American women who face dual marginality and are not only missing physically from superintendent roles, but also absent from research as well (Angel

et al., 2013). There is a huge disparity in research regarding the number of African American women serving as district-level administrators, the number actually serving as superintendents, and why they are absent (Angel et al., 2013). This gap also exists in the literature surrounding the experiences of African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina, and there is a need to explore their experiences and give them a voice as to why African American women are the most prepared yet least employed in the superintendency.

As of 2000, the superintendency was the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the nation (Björk & Keedy, 2001; Sharp et al., 2000) with women comprising only 13.2% of superintendent roles (Kowalski, 2006); that number has since grown to 24.1% (Kowalski et al., 2011), however, only 2% are African American women. Such a low percentage is striking considering that women of color comprise a higher percentage of assistant, associate or deputy superintendent positions while holding or working on certification than White women in the same roles (85% versus 73%), making women of color more likely than any other group to be prepared to assume the superintendency (Angel et al., 2013; Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Despite being immediately subject to both race and gender discrimination, or double jeopardy (Shorter-Gooden, 2004), African American women have persevered and continually defied these challenges by seeking positions traditionally held by White men, and to a lesser extent, African American men and White women (Brown, 2014).

In the state of North Carolina specifically, African American women superintendents comprise only 0.05% of active superintendents. During 2007-2008, 12 (10.43%) North Carolina superintendents were women, and two (1.73%) were African American women; by 2009-2010, the growth rate for women had nearly doubled to 18.26% with 21 women holding North Carolina superintendent positions, however, African American women saw no growth (1.73%) (Angel et

al., 2013; NC Department of Public Instruction, 2009, 2011). Therefore, though the glass ceiling impacts all women, "gains made by White women resulting from affirmative action are not reflected for women of color" (Turner, 2002, p. 81), yet few studies provide in-depth understanding of the context of this phenomenon. Though the lack of research still exists, today, NC has the largest number of African American women superintendents ever before. There are ten currently holding the office of superintendent out of 116.

The lack of representation, research, and resources begs many questions which are the impetus for this study: Is there a place for African American women among the top leaders in K-12 education? How do African American women "seek recruitment and retention to the public school superintendency?" (Brown, 2014, p. 575-576). Who serves as mentors to African American women in a field where they are both underserved and underrepresented? And why, in North Carolina, a state comprised of 2,048,628 African Americans ("suburbanstats," n.d.) are less than 9% of superintendents African American women? Therefore, it is important to capture and share the experiences of African American women superintendents if we are to build more inclusive communities of education and eliminate the chasm that exists for minorities pursuing executive leadership positions in education (Wiley, 2014). The problem is that African American women are obtaining fewer superintendent jobs than their White counterparts (Angel et al., 2013; Osler & Webb, 2014), yet "neither, has credence or validation been given to the impact of race, gender, and social politics on the recruitment and retention process of African American women in the public school superintendency" (Brown, 2014, p. 576). There is a need to explore the experiences of African American women superintendents and give them a voice.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. For the purpose of this study, a person is considered Black or African American if an individual has origins in any of the African Black racial groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Today, African American women comprise only 2% of the nation's superintendents, and only 0.05% of the superintendency in North Carolina. Existing research examines the experiences of all superintendents, including women superintendents, and even Latina women superintendents, but the data substantially lacks the experiences of African American women superintendents. Collins' (2000) Black feminist thought guides this study as it analyzes and emphasizes the historical and ongoing marginalization of African American women in American society. Black feminist thought will also provide a unique framework concerning the experience of African American women, a rarefied perspective unavailable to others (Collins, 2000).

Significance of the Study

Dillard (2000) stated that the voices of African American women are often excluded from research surrounding the superintendency. In fact, most existing research predominantly follows the traditional careers of White men or generalizes the experiences of all women, thereby neglecting to evaluate the dramatic impact of the intersectionality of race, gender and class oppression for African American women pursuing the superintendency (Glass, 1992). The complexities of dual marginality cannot be extricated or extrapolated, but coexist, so the unique experiences of African American women superintendents and other underrepresented groups should be examined individually rather than treated as one large group with common experiences (Tillman & Cochran, 2000). As gender bias and racism are not limited to school administration

and education leadership, a study of this specificity could "impact the awareness and attitudes about social justice issues among members of various professional education communities" (Tillman & Cochran, 2000, p. 55).

Empirical

Existing literature fails to explore why African American women are not attaining the superintendency; it also fails to explain why their perspectives and experiences have not been shared. The National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) compiled the 2012-13 African-American School Superintendents Directory indicating that there are 144 black female superintendents across the nation. Furthermore, the NABSE data, disaggregated by states, indicate that the 16 states where there is no black superintendent representation of either gender are Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, and Wyoming. Combining this near lack of representation in the superintendency with the absence of research exploring the phenomena "renders us invisible, absent from scholarship and worldview" (Cannon, 2016, p. 119).

Over the past 30 years, there has been little research and literature that examined the challenges faced by African American women superintendents (Angel et al., 2013; Brown, 2014). Brown (2014) posited:

> Rarely are the voices of African American women superintendents revealed to solely address the issues and challenges of recruitment and retention faced by African American women to the public school superintendency. Neither, has credence or validation been given to the impact of race, gender, and social politics on the recruitment and retention process of African American women in the public school superintendency. (p. 576)

In "The Recruitment and Retention of African American Women as Public School Superintendents" by Brown (2014), participants indicated that race was unequivocally the deciding factor regarding whether African American women were recruited and retained for the superintendency. She noted that the problem did not lie with lack of preparation, available talent nor the recruitment process, but the decisions made by those in power, implying that despite progress (the enactment of Brown v. Board of Education, the 1964 Civil Rights Era, affirmative action, etc.), power holders still discriminated (Brown, 2014). Muhs (2012) further supported this, finding that decision makers continue to weigh the strongest credentials of White men while focusing on the weakest credentials of racial minorities. This process most often occurs subconsciously, even when people believe that they are not racist or sexist.

In the field of education and school administration specifically, though there is an overrepresentation of women in the teaching profession and university programs that prepare them, an underrepresentation of women exists in the superintendency (Glass, 2000). An even bigger chasm exists when analyzing the number of African American women superintendents (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013), and such disparities extend to minority women beyond education leadership. Not only is the representation of women in leadership in academe not reflective of the proportion of women in the general population (Winter, 2016), parallels can also be drawn from the experiences of minority faculty members in academe, which also exhibits a dearth of women of color in leadership positions: of 568,719 total of full-time faculty, only 204,794 (36%) are women, and only 29,546 (14%) are women of color (Turner, 2002). Women of color were more likely to occupy the junior, untenured positions than men of color, and according to the American Council on Education, women of color in tenure-track positions experienced lower tenure rates (Turner, 2002; Wilds, 2000).

Faculty women of color perceived that their success was hindered by both race and gender discrimination and that their intersectionality compounded workplace pressures, highlighting the many complexities that pervade the daily experiences of minority women in education (Turner, 2002). Turner's participants found it difficult to differentiate which form of marginalization was at play: racism or gender-bias. "I don't know if they tend to discount my contributions because I'm new, female, Latina, young, or what. Perhaps a combination of all of the above" (Turner, 2002, p. 77). Further speaking to dual marginality, and in comparison to the norm, which in this case refers to White men, Turner (2002) posited:

> Those who differ from the norm within the corporate hierarchy encounter a cycle of cumulative disadvantage, whereas those who fit the norm experience a cycle of cumulative advantage. Her theories imply that the more ways in which one differs from the "norm," the more social interactions will be affected within multiple contexts. Situations in which a woman of color might experience marginality are multiplied depending on her marginal status within various contexts. (p. 76-77)

Consequently, capturing and sharing the perspectives and experiences of African American women pursuing the superintendency can have far-reaching benefits for aspiring African American women superintendents, professors, school administration, educational leadership, and many other members of academe. African American women may gain insight on how to navigate prospective executive leadership roles, professors may learn how to better prepare African American women for executive leadership roles, school board members may apply the data to make more informed decisions for future leaders, and all of academia, school administration, and educational leadership may glean information instrumental to building more inclusive communities of education.

Theoretical

This study will embrace Collin's (2000) thought and seek to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents, in hope that an increased understanding will empower other minority and African American women to attain superintendency by shedding light on their shared experiences, creating an empathetic path to mentorships and highlighting and filling blind spots within the field of research. The study will also illuminate Black feminist thought and demonstrate growth of the theory. The findings may be imperative to future African American women superintendents and may be incorporated in superintendent programs that aim to provide the best preparation possible for all students seeking superintendency.

Practical

African American women are obtaining fewer superintendent jobs than their White counterparts (Angel et al., 2013; Osler & Webb, 2014), and there is little research exploring why. Giving voice to the few African American women superintendents who have attained the position and highlighting their experiences, learned lessons and advice seeks to create invaluable resources and a network of mentoring to assist in the preparation of others aspiring to the office. Additionally, the sharing of experiences could promote best practices for all women, enabling more women, African American women included, to achieve their goal of obtaining roles in education leadership. Examining the experiences of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina may provide invaluable data for aspiring African American women superintendents, professors, school board members, and others in academia, school administration, and educational leadership. African American women may gain insight on how to navigate prospective executive leadership roles, professors may learn how to better prepare African American women for executive leadership roles, school board members can apply the

data to make more informed decisions for future leaders, and other members of academia, school administration, and educational leadership can glean information instrumental to building more inclusive communities of education.

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenological study sought to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. The theory guiding this study was Collins' (2000) Black feminist thought as it analyzes and emphasizes the historical and ongoing marginalization of African American women in American society. Black feminist thought provided a unique framework concerning the experiences of African American women, a rarefied perspective unavailable to others (Collins, 2000). Since the emphasis of this study was to describe the experiences of the participants, in order to address the central and sub-questions, data was collected by interviewing women who experienced the phenomenon of serving as superintendent in a North Carolina school system (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The central and sub questions formulated from a review of the literature to complete the research were as follows.

Central Question

How do African American women describe their lived experiences in superintendent positions in the state of North Carolina?

Black feminist thought provided a unique framework concerning the experiences of African American women, a rarefied perspective unavailable to others (Collins, 2000). This theory gave insight to the phenomenon from the point of view of the participants. Further, the need to know the experiences of African American women was compounded by a lack of research. Little research and literature exist that examines or illuminates the challenges faced by

African American women superintendents, and the voices of African American women superintendents are rarely heard (Angel et al., 2013; Brown, 2014). Their concerns addressing the issues and challenges of recruitment and retention have gone unaddressed. "Neither, has credence or validation been given to the impact of race, gender, and social politics on the recruitment and retention process of African American women in the public school superintendency" (Brown, 2014, p. 576).

Sub-Questions

In addition to the central research question, three sub-questions guided my study. The three sub-questions more clearly define what I seek to find out in the central question. These questions more closely focus on the nature and purpose of my study (Creswell, 2013).

Sub-Question 1. What specific processes or strategies were employed by participants to gain their role as a superintendent in North Carolina? Since 1995, the number of women pursuing educational administration doctoral and master's level programs has surpassed men by more than 50% (Björk, 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Muñoz et al., 2014). Examining the experiences of participants sought to provide a rationale of why women continue to enroll in programs leading to the superintendency.

The lack of representation of African American women was also mirrored in the mentoring, social support systems, and the research and resources available to those women. Women in school administration have a weaker mentoring system in place than their male colleagues, mainly because of a shortage of women role models and mentors at the highest levels of school management (Muñoz et al., 2014). "A lack of female role models and mentors to support women aspiring to the superintendency is considered one of the most significant barriers women face" (Glass et al., 2000 as cited in Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 768). These

challenges are only further compounded for women of color who face the dual marginality of racism and gender bias.

Sub-Question 2. How have the personal backgrounds of participants as black women contributed to their experiences in superintendent positions in North Carolina? Black feminist thought discusses the Black woman's standpoint and explains how experiences and ideas shared by African American women provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society (Collins, 1990).

Sub-Question 3. How do participants describe the impact of their personal identity in their experiences as a superintendent in North Carolina? Historically, American power holders, influencers, and decision makers have been disproportionately comprised of White men, and though there has been progress towards eliminating the gender-bias, the majority of today's leaders and decision-makers remain in that category (Osler & Webb, 2014). Research has indicated that being a woman significantly increases the difficulty of achieving the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007), and that challenge is only further exacerbated for African American women who face dual marginality and are not only physically absent from the superintendency, but also absent from research surrounding the superintendency (Angel et al., 2013).

More recently, women of color comprise a higher percentage of assistant, associate, or deputy superintendent positions while holding or working on certification than White women in the same roles (85% versus 73%), making women of color more likely than any other group to be prepared to assume the superintendency (Angel et al., 2013; Brunner & Grogan, 2007). However, their perceptions and attitudes are noticeably absent from research; one African American woman superintendent expressed that there was a ceiling that could not seem

to be broken and that not only were there communities that were not ready to accept African American women in the role of superintendent, but there were also school board members who had difficulty with African American women, and women in general, in these powerful roles (Muñoz et al., 2014; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015).

In the field of education and school administration specifically, though there is an overrepresentation of women in the teaching profession and university programs that prepare them, an underrepresentation of women exists in the superintendency (Glass, 2000); an even bigger chasm exists when analyzing the number of African American women superintendents (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013). The gender imbalance has far-reaching implications as "some women may experience low self-efficacy and therefore lack confidence for working in a male-dominated field"; "limited expertise beyond curriculum and instruction often becomes a barrier when women are not afforded opportunities to gain a diverse range of skills or construct a career path that will effectively lead them to the superintendency;" "additionally, a lack of female role models and mentors to support women aspiring to the superintendency is considered one of the most significant barriers women face" (Glass et al., 2000 as cited in Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 768).

In "The Recruitment and Retention of African American Women as Public School Superintendents" study by Brown (2014), participants indicated that race was unequivocally the deciding factor regarding whether African American women were recruited and retained for the superintendency. She noted that the problem did not lie with lack of preparation, available talent nor the recruitment process, but the decisions made by those in power, implying that despite progress (the enactment of Brown v. Board of Education, the 1964 Civil Rights Era, affirmative action, etc.), power holders still discriminated (Brown, 2014). Muhs (2012) further supported

this, finding that decision makers continue to weigh the strongest credentials of White men while they focus on the weakest credentials of racial minorities; this process most often occurs subconsciously, even when people believe that they are not racist or sexist.

Definitions

1. *African American* - According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), a person is considered Black or African American if an individual has origins in any of the African Black racial groups
2. *Black feminist thought* - Black women's political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of reality than available to other groups. Black women often experience double discrimination, experiencing sexism and racism (Collins, 2000).
3. *Superintendent* - A superintendent is the chief executive officer of a public school district (What Does a School Superintendent Do, n.d.). The superintendent is responsible for all school district operations including, but not limited to, instructional, organizational, and community-wide leadership (What Does a School Superintendent Do, n.d.).
4. *Transcendental phenomenology* - This approach, discussed by Moustakas (1994), examines the lived experiences of individuals experiencing a phenomenon. It allows the researcher to "discover the nature and meaning of things as they appear and in their essence" (p. 26).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Chapter One introduced the problem surrounding African American women superintendents, as well as the

purpose of this study and its importance to the field of school administration and present and future African American women superintendents. The introduction also described this study's research design, revealed its practical, empirical, and theoretical contributions, and presented the research questions, concluding with a brief listing of definitions to assist with comprehension of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two is a presentation of the history and literature surrounding African American women in the superintendency. Though times and perceptions have changed with regard to race and sex in the workforce, a disproportionate representation of African American women serving in the role of school superintendent has remained (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2012). Chapter Two will explore Black feminist thought and explain why this theory is relevant to existing research surrounding the chasm in representation, as well as delve into the history of leadership, women in leadership, and specifically black women in leadership. Finally, the history of the superintendency, women in the superintendency, and African American women in the superintendency will be examined.

Theoretical Framework

Portney and Watkins (2009) stated that theory comes from the need to organize complex facts and observations and give them meaning, explanation and description using many components including concepts, variables, and constructs. Research uses observations and data from previous investigations to develop and test theories, demonstrating how and why they work. Because of previous research, we do not have to start from scratch each time we attempt to give meaning to complex facts and observations within the context of research (Portney and Watkins, 2009).

Howard-Hamilton found it difficult to utilize theoretical constructs to understand and explain the life experiences of African American women, arguing that, from a historical and ideological perspective, traditional theories fail to fully encapsulate issues faced by African American women (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). A relevant theory should be “based on their

cultural, personal, and social contexts, which clearly differ significantly from those of men and women who have not experienced racial and gender oppression" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 20). Black feminist thought was a promising theory for "understanding the intersecting identities of African American women and explaining ways in which their needs can be addressed effectively" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 21).

Black feminist thought clarifies and calls attention to the analysis of ideas and experiences specific to African American women. Patricia Hill Collins developed the theory of Black feminist thought in response to hooks' (1989) urging African American women to construct a model of "feminist theorizing and scholarship that is inclusive, that widens our options, that enhances our understanding of black experiences and gender" (hooks, 1989, p. 182). Collins (2000) noted that Black feminist thought is derived from many voices that shine a light on the diversity, richness, and power of African American women's ideas and feeling as part of a long-standing African American women's community. She decisively chose to evade traditional feminist beliefs in the development of Black feminist thought, as feminist theory is grounded in the experiences and ideas of White women (Collins, 2000). The lived experiences of African American women who survive despite what can be described as a double-edged sword of oppression are entirely different from those of the dominant group and cannot accurately be observed and analyzed in a side-by-side comparison.

According to Beverly Guy-Sheftall, living as an African American woman stimulates a Black feminist sensibility that encompasses both experiences and ideas (Collins, 1990). In contrast, "the Collective placed a stronger emphasis on capitalism as a source of Black women's oppression and on political activism as a distinguishing feature of Black feminism" (Collins, 1990, para. 3). Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist thought reconciled this definitional tension

by focusing on “those experiences and ideas shared by African American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society-and theories that interpret these experiences,” fostering the framework of a distinctive Black feminist consciousness (Collins, 1990, para. 9). Collins insisted, “Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African American women, which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality by those who live it”, and the underrepresentation of African American women in positions for which they qualify cannot be identified as a gender-only issue but must also include the interlocking systems of race and class (Collins, 1990, para 10). For Collins, these three interlocking systems of oppression--sexism, racism and class discrimination--existed concurrently, and the Black feminist lens used in this study focused on the ever-present intersectionality of those three factors (Collins, 1990).

According to Collins (1990), African American women share the experience of being African American women in a society that depreciates women, particularly women of African descent. This parallel experience proposes that certain characteristic themes will be prominent in an African American woman’s standpoint. For example, one core theme is a legacy of struggle. “Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of White-supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggles: struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one White, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed" (Cannon, 1985, p. 30 as cited in Collins, 1990). This legacy of struggle can be directly attributed to a form of oppression bell hooks (2004) astutely coins “imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (para. 2).

Oppression, as defined by Collins (2000), is “any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (p. 6). Further, Collins (2000) states that oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if they frame their ideas in the language that is most familiar to and comfortable for the dominant group; this requirement often changes the meaning of the ideas of African American women and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. Systemic oppression has created a subordinate space for African American women, subduing the ideas and worldviews of African American women intellectuals while simultaneously valuing the ideas and viewpoints of the dominant group. Discrediting African American women as intellectuals causes them to be generally rejected for positions of authority and leadership. By placing African American women’s experiences at the forefront of Collins’ analysis, it gives other groups, like White women and African American men, the opportunity to reflect on the parallels and dissimilarities between groups.

Though nearly half a century has passed, and society has experienced some gains since integration and the Civil Rights Era, African Americans in the United States are still plagued by racism as demonstrated by the highly publicized and politicized murders of African Americans across the United States (Hoggard, Jones, & Sellers, 2017). African American women have long been victimized by a society that devalues them based on both race and gender simultaneously (Doughty, 1980), and while they have shared the plight of other marginalized groups, “a Black woman cannot be ‘female as opposed to being black’; she is female and black” (Spelman, 2001, p. 78). The complexities of dual marginality cannot be extricated or extrapolated, but coexist, and Black feminist thought is a collection of ideas based upon social, economic, and political standpoints of

African American women who have been marginalized and excluded from the mainstream discourse.

Collins (2000) establishes the importance of Black feminist thought through six distinctive features. Those distinctive features include how African American women must participate in a dialectical relationship connecting African American women's oppression and activism. A dialectical relationship suggests that there are at least two opposing groups on issues of social justice. As a result, as oppression continues, Black women must resist the practices and ideas of oppression (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) and Crenshaw (1991) describe intersectionality as the point where systems of oppression come together and in the case of black women, these oppressions are race and gender. This position gives black women the unique ability to be able to convey the lived experiences of black women and to foster better understanding of the African American woman's social position in society (Collins, 2000).

The second feature of Black feminist thought highlights the tension linking experiences and ideas. Collins (2000) states that while African American women have similar challenges and life experiences, they do not share all of the same experiences, and it would be one-sided if only one African American woman's lived experiences were used for the analysis of Black feminist thought. and all other Black women's experiences were excluded. As a result, Collins derived the standpoint theory, stressing that "no homogeneous Black woman's standpoint exists...instead, it may be more accurate to say that a Black woman's collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges" (p. 28).

The third feature of Black feminist thought is the connection between the fluctuating experiences of African American women as a diverse group and the perspective gained from

their differing experiences. Recognizing that social issues are multifaceted is key here. Further, dialogue about the differences in group standpoint and diversity of experiences is necessary if homogeneity and heterogeneity of experiences is to be understood. "U.S. Black women's collective historical experiences with oppression may stimulate a self-defined Black women's standpoint that in turn can foster Black women's activism" (Collins, 2000, p. 30). Collins' (2000) gave an example of this in her work that described a southern woman, who during the Civil Rights Era took a job at a mill, with the responsibility of cleaning restrooms that she was prohibited from using herself. Like all African Americans during Jim Crow, the woman had to trudge one mile to the cellar to use the segregated restroom instead, but one day, the woman questioned her boss and asked why, if she could enter the restroom to clean it, could she not also use it? Upon receiving an unsatisfactory response to her question, she decided to stop walking the mile to the cellar and use the restroom she entered each day to clean anyway. She found her boss' standpoint inadequate, therefore, she developed her own standpoint, which propelled her to action (Collins, 2000).

The fourth feature of Black feminist thought recognizes the contributions of African American women as intellectuals (Collins, 2000). African American women are essential to Black feminist thought because they alone are uniquely positioned to understand and convey the lived experiences of African American women, and "foster the group autonomy that fosters effective coalitions with other groups" (Collins, 2000, p. 36). Further, African American women viewed as intellectuals are less likely to view Black feminist research as a fluke (Collins, 2000). According to Collins (2000), "Black women intellectuals from all walks of life must aggressively push the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one's own agenda is essential to empowerment" (p. 36).

The fifth feature of Black feminist thought is the significance of change. "In order for Black feminist thought to operate effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic" (Collins, 2000, p. 39). Because social conditions are ever changing, Black feminist thought has to stay relevant, and in order to remain pertinent and be prepared to continue to resist social oppression, the movement needs new Black feminist analyses (Collins, 2000).

The sixth and final feature of Black feminist thought is its relationship to other projects for social justice (Collins, 2000). It is widely accepted among African American women intellectuals that Black feminist research is greater than any individual is (Collins, 2000). With that in mind, the goal of this community of teachers and learners is to support African American community institutions, uphold human dignity, empower others, and to advance issues of social justice (Collins, 2000).

Black feminist intellectuals recognize the core themes of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000). They also recognize the intersectionality of race, gender and class oppression, and call for the replacement of denigrated images of Black womanhood with self-defined images, a belief in Black women's activism as mothers, teachers, and Black community leaders, and a sensitivity to sexual politics (Collins, 1990). It should be noted that although all African American women experience discrimination in the form of White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy and/or racism, social class differences influence how that racism manifests; for instance, middle-class Black women are less likely to experience blatant incidents than working-class Black women, however, the common racist belief that African Americans are less intelligent than Whites has remained strong for both groups (Collins, 1990).

Alston (2000) continued by describing the underrepresentation of women in top executive positions in the workplace as the glass ceiling effect; if the woman is African American, the effects are greater, and the ceiling is described as concrete, not glass. For African American women, the phenomenon of pervasive race and gender biases has been referred to as the double-whammy effect, and was influenced by social, political, economic and class elements. There are four delimiting barriers that lock women, African American women in particular, into lower-level, lower-paying jobs, especially within the realms of education. These barriers represent the intersectionality of various elements of oppression for African American women and include workplace discrimination, social and cultural acceptance of stereotypical views, and skewed beliefs and practices as they relate to African American women in the workforce (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The ability to ascend to higher positions within organizations is further compounded by the lack of mentoring, sponsorships, formal and informal networks (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995), and restricted access to knowledge emphasizing the importance of career pathway decisions related to education preparation and formal training, along with an understanding of the need to select appropriate employment experiences that support access (Bjork, 2000). Superville (2016) advised women in teaching and administration to participate in networking, while noting that networking can be very time-consuming, particularly for women with families. These are all major contributing and defining factors to the low representation of African American women in the superintendency.

Related Literature

Though limited, previous research and literature brought light to the experiences of African American women superintendents and have helped frame this transcendental phenomenological study. A brief history of leadership, women in leadership, and specifically

African American women in leadership will be given. Following the leadership history, the history of the superintendency, women in the superintendency, and African American women in the superintendency will be examined. Each of these areas provides content for understanding the experiences of the superintendents who are participants in this dissertation.

Educational Leadership

Historically, educational leadership has grossly been monopolized by White men, meaning that educational leadership has traditionally been explained, conceptualized and seen through the eyes of White men (Mertz & McNeely, 1998). Throughout history the position of superintendent of schools in the United States has been the most male-dominated executive position of any profession (Björk & Keedy, 2001; Sharp et al., 2000). Still today, women are significantly underrepresented in the superintendency and their representation continues to be significantly lower in comparison to men (Muñoz et al., 2014), holding only approximately 24.1% of all superintendent positions in the United States (Kowalski, 2011).

Approximately 100 years ago, Ella Flagg Young, the first woman superintendent of Chicago, spoke optimistically about women being more prominent in leading schools (Blount, 1998). Seventy-one years passed before another woman was selected to lead the Chicago Public Schools (Blount, 1998). Now, one hundred years later, women have continued to dominate in the career of teaching but remain a minority in the superintendent's position (Muñoz et al., 2014). According to Blount (1998), women in the early 1900s accounted for about 70% of teachers, yet it was not expected that these same women teachers would mount to top leadership positions in education where mostly men were employed.

Though men have continued to lead more school systems, women largely outnumber men as classroom teachers (Muñoz et al., 2014), and though not equally represented in the ranks,

women are most actively preparing for careers in educational leadership. The numbers of women in educational administration doctoral and master's level programs have surpassed that of men by more than 50% over the last decade, however such growth further highlights the concern that little progress has been made in the number of women aspiring, applying for, and assuming superintendency positions (Björk, 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). This was especially a concern in relation to the number of women enrolled in university educational administration, which is significantly higher than men, further demonstrating how women are preparing for careers in educational leadership, but are simply not being hired (Muñoz et al., 2014).

In a profession overpopulated by women, why do so few women occupy the top leadership position? Most women indicate that they view themselves as the primary caregivers of their families and are less likely to go into administration early in their careers (Superville, 2016). A career in administration is generally a precursor to the position of superintendent, and women rarely go into administration while they have small children; the same is not typically true for men (Superville, 2016).

The lack of women in senior levels of school district administration, and in particular the superintendency raises many concerns. In K–12 education, women's influence on policy changes, decisions, and practice in the field of education is limited (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006), and when women are only represented in the superintendency in miniscule numbers, the impact they can have is minimal. In order to facilitate change with fidelity, women must be present in representation and in a diversity of leadership styles. Women must be influential in their school communities, in the organization of schools, and at a local and national level. With representation at all levels, women can impact educational reform, providing the most effective

support for students, interacting with school boards, influencing searches for new candidates, and ultimately improving schools (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

The minimal voice that women have in school district decisions also severely impacts societal expectations. Historically, scholars in psychology extensively examined stereotypical norms defined by society of how men and women should behave (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Glick & Fiske, 1999), and when most of the district superintendents were men, the public assumed that women in the superintendency were an anomaly. Therefore, the lack of representation is a self-fulfilling prophecy: without adequate representation and inclusion, society does not perceive, nor expect women to aspire towards the school superintendency (Muñoz et al., 2014).

Women in Educational Leadership

Women became teachers and educational leaders as a result of changes in the structure of education during the U.S. Civil War (Iowa Pathways, 2012). Until the late 18th century, teaching was a field dominated by men, and as those men were drafted for war, their teaching positions became available and were made available to White women (Shakeshaft, 1989). Phebe Sudlow, a successful teacher for 15 years, was appointed to a principalship, but before accepting the position, she requested a salary equal to that of men holding similar principal positions; her request was heavily resisted, but was eventually granted (Iowa Pathways, 2012). Sudlow continued her career as principal of a teacher training school and was later named superintendent of the school district; she was the first woman superintendent of a public school district in the United States (Iowa Pathways, 2012).

As of 2011, only 24.1% of superintendents in the United States were women (Kowalski et al., 2011). Though education is a field largely populated by women today, women still have

fewer opportunities in education leadership (Muñoz et al., 2014). In the future, there will be more women than men in leadership roles (Grogan & Brunner, 2005), however, the gains made by and for women to date have been minor and a glass ceiling still exists (Yong-Lyun & Brunner, 2009). Including gradual increases in recent years, still only one-fifth of superintendents are women, in a field in which women comprise 76% of teachers; Snyder and Dillow (2013) said of this 76%, 83% identify themselves as White and only 7% of the teachers across the nation are African American. Additionally, after a call for policy reform in America's workforce, research reports that at the current rate of progress it will take over 30 years for women to achieve equitable representation in the superintendency and earn salaries comparable with men.

Gender bias is defined as unequal treatment in employment opportunities and expectations due to gender (Gender Bias, n.d.), and research reveals that all women will experience gender bias at some point in their lives (Jones-Mitchell, 1993). According to Acker (1990), organizational structure is not gender neutral; instead, assumptions and contracts used to construct organizations and to provide the common ground for theorizing about them even contain gender bias. Though education is a field largely populated by women, gender bias still primarily only affects women negatively, and there is growing research to suggest that the challenges women encounter in the role of superintendent are very different than those encountered by men (Grogan, 2008).

Researchers who study gender and the superintendency have highlighted the importance of differentiating gender issues in educational leadership (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) argued that labor market conditions in public school administration included the traditional stereotypes of privileged White men and gender bias in

various aspects of the position. Once selected for the superintendency, women in the position reported "living in a fishbowl," receiving higher visibility and thus higher scrutiny from the community and media than their male counterparts (Grogan, 2008). Additionally, a study of women superintendents illuminated how sex-typed expectations and gender bias promoted isolation in the profession and exacerbated their stress in the role (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996) Once attaining the superintendent position, it became immediately apparent to women that most of their colleagues were men, leading to isolation and stress (Brunner, 2000). Prevalent in studies about leadership and gender is the "maintenance of a myth of neutrality that keeps most administrators from confronting issues of sexism" (Skrla et al., 2009 p. 49), but this is also partnered with a concern for the discriminatory social constructions in the culture of educational administration (Muñoz et al., 2014).

Research further notes that competence, viewpoints, and perspectives of women are a concern in organizational leadership (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich 2009). The past 25 years of research on women in education leadership supports the claim that many women leaders view the role differently than men, viewing it as a form of advocacy, aiming to impact educational reform by eliminating existing disparities in education for all student populations (Grogan, M., & Shakeshaft, C., 2011). As a result of their findings, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) introduced a framework that better exemplifies the feminist ethic of women in educational leadership, identifying five primary dispositions: relational leadership, leadership for social justice, leadership for learning, spiritual leadership, and balanced leadership.

Research and literature on the superintendency is saturated with the perspective of White men (Bryant, 2014), and presently, male-dominant theories look at the social order of male dominance in organizational behavior to determine the performance of women in educational

leadership (Banks, 2007). Evans (1998) indicated that women are promoted based on their performance, while men are often promoted on their perceived potential. Other studies using this theory observe women in leadership through a deficit perspective. Power issues resulting from a deficit perspective are evidenced when women receive the message that even though they are excellent educators, coordinators and principals, they are unable to fill the role of superintendents, as a male-dominated position (Banks, 2007). These factors create self-doubts among women candidates and reinforce the roles of men in a male-dominated field (Muñoz et al., 2014).

African American Women in Educational Leadership

Education leadership has been far from exempt from the effects of the intersectionality of sexism and racism, in fact, African American women were not recognized or promoted in the teaching profession until the 19th century. There is very little documentation of African American women in school administration and education leadership prior to the second half of the century, but Quaker-sponsored Southern schools were the first schools to employ African American women as administrators. Philanthropist Anna Jeanes endowed one million dollars to the Negro Rural School Fund, in support of the Jeanes' Supervisors, a group of predominantly African American women who worked tirelessly to improve educational programs in segregated schools in the South (Shakeshaft, 1999); the Jeanes' were phased out with desegregation and there have been no comparable programs since then.

By 1920, education had risen to the seventh top occupation for African American women (Shakeshaft, 1987). During the 1950s and 1960s, desegregation meant integration and subsequently, the loss of teaching positions and principalships for African Americans. When forced to consolidate, districts that formerly employed both White and minority teachers and

administrators eliminated the minorities; within a 3-year span, the number of African American principals dramatically decreased. From 1967–1970, the number of African American principals in North Carolina decreased from 670 to 170, in Alabama from 250 to 40, and in Louisiana, from 1966-1971, the number of African American principals fell from 512 to 363 (Muñoz et al., 2014). These statistics have yet to recover today. "Inequality and inequity pervade the landscape of education in America, providing a convincing argument that the education system in the United States is in crisis because it mirrors and perpetuates the imbalances in access and opportunity present in society" (Levin, Lambert, & Petty, 2012, p. 269). Today, teacher training and higher education programs are still in need of critical intervention regarding racial equality and social justice, and studies have ensued to dismantle racism and gender bias for women faculty of color at predominantly White institutions where African American women still face inequality and injustice in education (Han & Leonard, 2017).

In 1982 Collier-Thomas said there were only a few books, essays or scholarly works that examined or evaluated the contributions of African American women to the history of education. Even today an unequal amount as compared to books about White men and women in history exist about African American women. A few African American women operated private schools, and some taught in co-educational institutions, however, with limited opportunities, African American men historically dominated the areas of teaching and preaching, and the majority of African American schools were run by men. Only in the last decade of the 19th century did African American women become a force in the segregated educational system of the South, and even then, they found it difficult to find teaching jobs, particularly in public schools, which typically only hired White teachers. When African American women were hired

in teaching positions and other educational positions they were usually in rural schools and were paid far less than all of their colleagues (Collier-Thomas, 2011).

Recent studies have actually shown that the African American man's pursuit of the superintendency differs dramatically from the African American woman's; the career path of African American men was similar to that of their White counterparts, whereas the career paths of African American women were not as direct, despite strong mentoring networks (Chambers, 2012). Further, when actually chosen for superintendent roles, African American women superintendents that participated in the study were often selected in districts that were in turmoil (Chambers, 2012).

African American women report experiencing many barriers along their way to the superintendency: the demands of family, societal socialization for traditional gender roles for men and women, gender bias or discrimination in the screening and selection process, lack of ability to relocate, the need to constantly prove oneself, the nature of superintendency work, little room for error, lack of job security, and exclusion from the established professional networks created by male administrators (Johnson, 2012). Theoretically, women can ameliorate the barriers by having a supportive family, excellent communication skills, a "no excuses" attitude, a doctorate, strong mentoring relationships with both men and women superintendents, management and leadership experiences, understanding of school finance, curriculum, and instruction, and a strong spiritual life (Johnson, 2012).

The Superintendency

Education was not directly mentioned in the Constitution, until the 10th Amendment, which made education the responsibility of the states (Houston, 2001). Historically, public school districts were initially run by state and local boards, without the guidance of professional

educators; in the early 1800s, the superintendency grew out of a need to oversee the fiscal use of state issued funds allocated to public education (Houston, 2001). Today this is still a major role in the superintendency. Initially, volunteers filled this role, however, realizing the weight and breadth of the responsibility, states eventually created a full-time position for a professional educator who would oversee their fiscal needs: the school district superintendent. In 1812, New York became the first state with a full-time state superintendent of education and was followed by several smaller states that also began with volunteer efforts that eventually transitioned to an appointed role (Houston, 2001). All of the states in the United States have since elected or appointed state-level superintendents (Kowalski, 2006). These elections or appointments have made the superintendent one of the most powerful roles in education.

The title "school superintendent" has taken on a broader definition than in years past; today's school superintendency includes the local school district position, as well as the state and district levels (Kowalski, 2006). The term superintendent originally only encompassed mill managers, Lutheran church officials, and Methodist church leaders, but it later evolved to include leaders of local school districts. At the turn of the 19th century, school superintendents were considered no more than master teachers (Kowalski, 2006), but today, the superintendency is complex and very political, often seen as a very gender exclusive position (Bjork, Glass & Brunner, 2000). According to Kowalski (2006), leadership was a quality holding political merit, and some superintendents were selected because they were connected to those making the appointments while others were selected simply because they were men (Kowalski, 2006). Historically, the superintendency has been mostly held by White men, and men are 40 times more likely than women to be promoted from teaching positions to high level leadership and ultimately the role of superintendent (Angel et al., 2013).

During desegregation, legislation aimed to provide an equal education to African American students who attended schools with little funding and scarce resources. Though seemingly well intentioned, integration led to the consolidation of schools, forcing many African American teachers, principals, and superintendents out of jobs (Wiley, 2014). African American teachers and administrators became a stark minority in the integrated school system, if they were included at all, and this scarcity of African Americans in leadership roles in education leadership still persists today (Wiley, 2014). Even still today, the majority of African American leaders are employed by large urban districts where they continually face challenges including lack of resources, underfunding, issues with teacher certification, and low student achievement, and such challenges have a direct effect on their performance and tenure (Brown, 2005).

The superintendency has become a highly politicized role as public school superintendents are not only directly accountable to the school board, but to state and local politicians as well (Hunter & Donahoo, 2005). Their relationships, and thus their political standing, hinge on issues surrounding the school district, potentially defining their status with the school community and local community at large, and ultimately impacting the duration of their tenure (Hunter & Donahoo, 2005). The school board has the authority to call for the resignation of a superintendent and they can also not renew the superintendent's contract.

When administrators receive support and have autonomy from politics, their tenure has fewer distractions, and the fewer political distractions a superintendent has, the more time they have to improve their school district (Hunter & Donahoo, 2005). However, school board members and politicians frequently distrust African American superintendents to lead their school districts. Further, African American superintendents seldom receive support from political officials and often experience very little autonomy while working with state and local

politicians (Hunter & Donahoo, 2005). African American superintendents are often questioned about their decisions, and school boards attempt to micro-manage them. Naturally this hinders their ability to truly be impactful and compounds the various pre-existing challenges. Oftentimes African American superintendents are viewed as puppets, pawns, or scapegoats by political officials, with many mayors in large cities using the viewed crisis in public education as an opportunity to usurp school districts in their communities (Hunter & Donahoo, 2005). Such takeovers have resulted in superintendents losing their autonomy to school boards, mayors, and other politicians who are competing for control of public education (Hunter & Donahoo, 2005).

Further, it is imperative that leadership programs preparing future leaders for positions balance theory and practical experiences so that participants are prepared for the true realities of the leadership position (Brown, 2005). In reality, superintendents are responsible for leading a diverse group of people, therefore the superintendency should represent the diversity of the people they serve (Skrla et al., 2009). Beard (2012) best summarized the ideal candidate for superintendency:

> Any administrator who cares about and for their students, the community they serve, equity and excellence, can and must do this work. One need not be African American to remedy inequities, nor is it necessary to be a woman to invoke the ethic of care. Decision-making is value-centered. With an emphasis on the value of diverse perspectives and a commitment to academic excellence and equity for all students, the decision to be on the right side of history is its own reward. (p. 70)

Women in the Superintendency

The underrepresentation of women in leadership is most evident in the superintendency, with gender disparities particularly notable in key leadership roles in K–12 school districts.

Women led 5.6% of K–12 school districts in 1993 compared to 1.6% of school districts in 1928 (Bell and Chase, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1989), and with only 4% growth in more than half a century, the gender gap seems insurmountable.

The social sciences employed several conceptual models to project insight and potential explanations of the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency. The meritocracy model, for instance, was a "person-centered explanation" (Ortiz and Marshall, 1988, p. 130), that presumed that competent people are promoted based on their abilities, personal characteristics, traits and individual attitudes, i.e. confidence and motivation (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). Oftentimes this model led to segregation by gender roles as meritocracy suggested that women were not as assertive as men, and unlike men, do not want power, were unwilling to play the political game, and did not apply for leadership roles (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). Researchers have noted that the meritocracy model blamed the victim, and have countered with alternative approaches (Shakeshaft, 1989). The model suggested women do not want power and that is untrue. Some women do want power and seek positions in which they have power. These women also know at times that they have to play the political game and not only are they willing to do it, they also have the resources needed to do it. These women also seek out and apply for leadership roles seeking the power they know they deserve.

Alternatively, the women's place model, as defined by Shakeshaft (1989), identified the root causes of inequities within the social structure of society and illuminates cultural and social norms that support discriminatory practices. Tallerico and Burstyn (1996) explained that societal norms and socialization patterns establish gender expectations that lead women and men into different areas of work, and in turn, those areas are assigned differential status and pay. The women's place model suggested that this socialized segregation of gender roles leads to a general

lack of women in positions of authority based on differences in expectations and socio-cultural stereotypes about how women look and behave, thereby directly contributing to the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996).

The last conceptual model that attempts to explain the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency was the organizational perspective, which shifted the focus from the individual to the institution, shifting the emphasis from internal obstacles to the external obstacles of women's integration into educational leadership roles (Estler, 1975). The organizational perspective focused on how institutions lock women into low-power and dead-end positions, dissipating the idea that women act in self-limiting ways and further illuminating the existence of structural and systemic barriers that work against all candidates other than White men (Estler, 1975).

According to research, simply being a woman significantly increases the difficulty of achieving the superintendency (Askren Edgehouse , 2008;Beard, 2012; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Johnson, 2012; Tallerico & Blount, 2004 Winter, 2016), as women aspiring to superintendent positions are viewed as women first, and administrators second (Winter, 2016). Nonetheless, women persist and are no longer satisfied to do the lion's share of the work and be denied access to roles in leadership (Blount, 1998). Negative gender stereotypes about women are prevalent in society and have become barriers for women, perpetuating discriminatory practices perpetrated by institutions (Winter, 2016). Gender biases are ever present barriers affecting women and their efforts to acquire superintendency positions in public schools (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2000a; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Grogan, 1996; Tallerico, 2000; Winter, 2016). Even women of color report that gender is more of a barrier for their pursuit of the job than that of race (Grogan, 1996).

Women often take a different route than men when pursuing the superintendency, enabling them to bring a more diverse disposition and skill set to the position (Winter, 2016). Grogan found that most women superintendents were former elementary principals and had had more experience in the classroom than their male cohorts (2005). When transitioning to the superintendency, women "leave behind the feminized territories of teaching and must make more adjustments than many of their male colleagues" (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). This additional classroom experience may also explain why women superintendents tend to take a more comprehensive approach when addressing the needs of their student population, often traversing their academic role to address the needs of at-risk and traditionally marginalized students (Grogan, 2005).

There are many roadblocks to being a woman candidate pursuing the superintendency, including but not limited to: school boards not being totally comfortable with a woman leader, university programs and school board associations refusing to acknowledge and promote skilled women candidates, less experience in secondary schools, and a lack of training and experience in school finance, facilities and management. Glass and colleagues noted that the lack of experience and training in managerial skills was often the failing point for superintendents' tenures, regardless of their sex or race (Gewertz, 2006), but posited that women have fewer opportunities to grow and gain experience in the areas of finance, administration, and community relations, areas viewed by 80% of current and former superintendents as essential to their success (Glass et al., 2000). Another challenge to achieving the superintendency are the higher expectations placed on women candidates (Muñoz et al., 2014), as evidenced by several decades of research completed by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). According to the AASA findings, 82% of women superintendents indicated that

school board members did not see them as strong managers, and 76% indicated school boards did not see them as capable of handling district finances (Muñoz et al., 2014). It is imperative that school boards and school districts trust women superintendents to effectively do the job for which they have studied and trained.

So many biases present major challenges for women superintendents. Both genders operate in a world and paradigm designed by and around men, but women superintendents lead differently than men, and physiological and socialized differences between men and women leaders are perceived negatively by the current masculinized culture in most school districts, superintendencies, and in general leadership theory (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). "Women experience the superintendency in fundamentally different ways based on gender. Hence, there is a need to conduct more research that challenges prevailing theories of the superintendency and develops new theories that take into account women in the superintendency" (Lemasters & Roach, 2012, p. 10).

Superville (2016) provided further evidence of these biases. One superintendent found that women candidates often feel they are not ready for promotion; she continued by indicating women will prepare, and prepare, and prepare, while men tend to step right into the challenge whether they are prepared or not (Superville, 2016). According to Dana and Bourisaw (2006), aspiring women superintendents also face four main forms of power issues when negotiating: power of and over self, power of social and cultural norms and expectations, power in relationships with others; and power through and to others (Muñoz et al., 2014). Superville (2016) also highlighted additional signs of bias on the path to superintendency where race is concerned.

For women, the first hurdle to the superintendency is to surpass the discriminatory aspects of recruitment and open the door, and the second hurdle is to enter it (Choi-Kalbus, 2000). If able to surpass recruitment and obtain a superintendent position, women must navigate the politics of board dynamics. Marietti and Stout (1994) found school boards that hired women superintendents were different from those that only hired men in that they had greater number of higher social status members (Marietti & Stout, 1994). Of those school boards that hire women superintendents, 60% of the members hold executive/management or professional positions, and two-thirds of the members are reported as having at least a college degree.

A significant challenge for women aspiring to the superintendency is the lack of mentors and role models. Mentoring is a crucial part of career development and advancement for prospective superintendents, however, it has been very difficult for women to find and become mentors. Long-term mentoring is a recurring theme in superintendent success (Buchanan, 2013), and a superintendency study completed in the South found that mentors for women superintendents were predominantly male (Muñoz et al., 2014). Mentors are imperative for career advancement, and it is important that women aspiring to the superintendency have other women as mentors to more directly align their nuanced experiences.

"Even more than the lack of mentors and roles models for women aspiring to the superintendency is the dearth of sponsors for women" (Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 768). A mentor is an individual that teaches and nurtures another, but, a mentor generally does not have the ability to promote a mentee whereas sponsors do (Muñoz et al., 2014). "This distinction is essential to women, since just knowing what to wear to the interview may represent good mentoring, getting an opportunity to interview is the benefit of a sponsor" (Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 768). Sponsors are unique; you do not find sponsors, they find you. When you demonstrate your values, beliefs,

and skills sponsors see you and help you cultivate your future (Muñoz et al., 2014). Women who hope to one day attain a superintendent position can benefit from both, if they are available.

Derrington and Sharratt (2009) replicated their 1993 study and found that even though the number of women accessing the superintendency increased, the rate that they are rising to the superintendency position remains low. Derrington and Sharratt (2009) examined 26 barriers that women superintendents experienced in the position, and though many of the barriers were similar, the authors saw a shift in their ranking, and women superintendents indicated that barriers to access the position were not self-imposed (Jones-Mitchell, 1993). However, in the 2007 study, the same response scored much higher as one of the two highest identified barriers (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). In 2007, the authors found that women superintendents were still struggling with decisions regarding work and family, further suggesting that a number of qualified women applicants will be untapped due to the conflicts between the superintendency and their family responsibilities (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Grogan and Brunner (2005) also discussed how some women superintendents experienced difficulty balancing family and work responsibilities, ultimately dissolving their marriages in order to meet the constant demands of the superintendency.

African American Women in the Superintendency

Historically, African American women who have earned leadership positions in education have exhibited a strong will and tenacity while enduring racism and sexism (Bell & Chase, 1993; Jones & Montenegro, 1983; Lomotey, 1993). African American women in education leadership were few in number and primarily concentrated in southern states where schools mainly served African American students (Kowalski, 2006). Most African American women in leadership were described as Jeanes supervisors and served as de facto superintendents

until the 1960s. These women had many of the same responsibilities as school superintendents, but were in charge of segregated African American schools, and worked under the direct supervision of the school district's white male superintendent (Angel et al., 2013).

Minor gains have been made to eliminate the gender disparities in the superintendency, and the diversity of the women participants selected in a national study of school superintendents essentially showed no change in terms of race and ethnicity in the superintendency (Christie, Jackson, & Babo, 2007). There is ample and growing literature about women in school leadership, however the research focusing on African American women in the superintendent role seems to have been overlooked (Thomas, 2014). Researchers interested in women superintendent experiences have been deterred by the lack of data that is available and the small number of women who hold or have held the position (Kowalski and Stouder, 1999). In response to the near insignificant amount of studies that focused on African American women superintendents, Alston (2000) attempted to identify constraints and facilitators experienced by African American women pursuing the superintendency, revealing five main constraints: the presence of the good-ole-boy network, lack of support systems and/or sponsorships and mentors, lack of awareness of political moves and ties, attitudes that African Americans lack competency required in leadership roles; and no formal method for identifying prospective African American candidates for leadership positions (Angel et al., 2013). Little has changed since that study and Angel (2013) posited that not only were the African American woman missing physically from the office of superintendent, but research that determines the perceptions and attitudes of African American women district administrators had not been explored. There is a gap in research about African American women serving as district-level administrators, the number actually serving as

superintendents, and why they are missing (Angel et al., 2013), that this research study hopes to fill.

Brown vs. Topeka, Kansas Board of Education produced numerous positive gains, however, a bi-product of the legislation eliminating segregation in schools was that it led to the dramatic decrease of the number of African American teachers and administrators (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013). The goal of desegregation was to provide equal education to African American students who often attended schools with little funding and scarce resources, but the fallout resulted in many African American teachers, principals, and superintendents being forced out of jobs. Within 3 years of the decision, from 1967 to 1970, African American principals decreased in North Carolina from 670 to 170 and in Alabama from 250 to 40, and in Louisiana, in the period of 1966 to 1971, the number of African American principals decreased from 512 to 363 (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013, p. 586). These men and women became virtually nonexistent in the newly integrated school system, if they were included at all, and this scarcity of African Americans in leadership in education continues today. The National Association of Black School Educators continue to push the importance of increasing the presence and need of African Americans in leadership roles, particularly the superintendency, as leadership should match the representation of African American students in school systems (Pascopella, 2011). The schools in America have become more and more diverse as evidenced by the number of schools in large urban districts which have a majority of African American students in enrollment (Brown, 2005). The diversity in student population has drawn attention to the number of African American school and district leaders (Brown, 2005). As schools and districts grow more and more diverse, more women and minorities are deciding to pursue the superintendency (de Santa Ana, 2008).

In 1993, Jones-Mitchell researched the perceptions of African American women, White-American women, and African American men superintendents, specifically, the influence of race and gender on their tenure in the superintendency. Using a quantitative instrument, the study found that each group had a different perspective of which bias most affected their tenure: White women reported gender, African American men reported race, and African American women reported both gender and race. African American women pursuing the superintendency face the same gender-bias as White women, but Superville highlighted additional signs of bias where race is concerned. The black woman superintendent she interviewed stated:

> I have a good friend who is a superintendent of color, who said to me he wouldn't work for a female superintendent. This is coming from a superintendent. There are many parallels with female pastors, where people just feel, "I won't attend a church where the pastor is a female." I think there is a lot of that, even among school board members. You have to remember it's school board members that hire the superintendent, and even when there are female school board members, it is no easier to be appointed as a woman. (Superville, 2016, p. 12)

Like women superintendents, African American superintendents have struggled for a presence in the superintendency (Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003; Pascopella, 2008). Jackson and Shakeshaft (2003) expressed that while African American educators comprise 12% of the nation's teachers, they only represent 3% of the nation's superintendents. Although the number of African American superintendents has increased since desegregation, African Americans tend to be limited to positions in largely African American communities (Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003; Pascopella, 2008). Jackson and Shakeshaft stated that African American candidates have

such limited access to superintendent positions that they believe that their best chance of attaining superintendency is in a minority school district.

African American women identified race as a bigger challenge than gender in the ascension to roles in the superintendency (Allen, Jacobsen & Lomotey, 1995). Velma Dolphin Ashley is cited as the first African American woman superintendent, having acquired the top spot in an Oklahoma school district in 1944; since then, the rise of African American women to superintendent positions has been extremely slow with very few achieving superintendent roles (Alston, 2000; Jackson, 1999). Grogan and Brunner (2005) noted that African American women do not attain superintendent roles as quickly as White women, finding that 70% of White women obtain their superintendency positions within the first year of applying while only 56% of African American women have such success.

During the recruitment and hiring process, Grogan and Brunner discovered that African American women were more likely to be hired by diverse school boards. African American women continued by describing the challenge of being African American and a woman as a life filled with "conflict, confusion, estrangement, isolation, and a plethora of unmarked beginnings and endings, jump starts, and failures" (Fordham, 1993, p. 24). African American women are often required to change, transforming their persona into one a little less African American or less feminine (Fordham, 1993).

Currently, there are nine African American women superintendents in North Carolina, comprising less than 1% of the superintendents across the state, and though this number does reflect minor gains, historically, the number of African American women superintendents in NC. has always been very low. For example, in the 2007-2008 school year, 12 NC superintendents were women, and of those 12, two were African American women; in subsequent years, more

women were selected for the superintendency: 21 women held the NC superintendency during the 2009-2010 year, yet still only two were African American (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2009, 2011). These gains are minor and suggest that more research is needed to examine the plight of African American women pursuing and holding the position (Angel et al., 2013), particularly given their preparedness.

African American women and other women of color are more likely than any other group to be prepared to serve in the role of the superintendent. An astounding 85% of those women are already serving in assistant, associate or deputy superintendent jobs, many of which are already holding or working on their certifications, compared to 73% of White women in the same positions (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). It is approximated that women will not be proportionally represented in the superintendency until the 22nd century (Angel et al., 2013); African American women are represented in even smaller numbers in the superintendency, therefore, it will be at least this long before African American women will be proportionally represented in the superintendency (Angel et al., 2013).

Summary

Chapter Two was a presentation of the history and literature of African American women in the superintendency. Chapter Two explained Black feminist thought and why this theory is relevant to the research. This review of the literature focused on research related to women and African American women with concern to educational leadership and the superintendency. Finally, the chapter looked at the history of the superintendency, women in the superintendency, and black women in the superintendency.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Chapter Three discusses the methods I used to accomplish this purpose, such as the research design, a detailed description of the research setting, and participants. The research questions are also listed again. Additionally, Chapter Three discusses the research procedures and data collection methods used in this study. Data for this study was triangulated. The chapter concludes with an overview of the data analysis procedures I used and ethical considerations.

Design

In qualitative research, researchers identify themes and rely on open ended data, often making claims primarily based on "constructivist perspectives" (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Set in a more natural, less controlled environment than quantitative research (Lauer, 2006), qualitative methods are typically described as "interactive and humanistic" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research focuses on how meaning is constructed and how people make sense of their lives and worlds; commonly used in the field of education, the design allows the researcher to conduct the study in an environment most conducive and supportive for participants with the goal of fostering open relationships with participants in their natural environments.

With the ultimate goal of investigating how individuals understand and frame their life experiences (Merriam, 2009), qualitative design gives participants an opportunity to provide detailed explanations of those experiences, including their interpretations thereof. The design can encompass many data collection methods, including interviews, observations, and document

analysis (Shirk, 2012), but the views of participants are essential to qualitative research, so researchers must be aware of their own values and biases during the research process (Creswell, 2007). Using qualitative research, based on the study of individual cases and not focused on numbers or statistics, gives the researcher the opportunity to instead concentrate on the collected verbal data and analysis (Gall, 2010). Researchers set their own guidelines and have a great degree of flexibility in qualitative data collection, but this study also employed a responsive interviewing model, using a "design and protocol that was continuous, flexible, and adaptable" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 42). Since the design typically seems simple and does not require a great degree of time, the responsive interviewing model allows flexibility that often leads to the perception that qualitative design lacks structure, however, it allows researchers to spend more time analyzing and interpreting the data.

Transcendental phenomenology is defined as research that values "returning to the self to discover the nature and meaning of things as they appear and in their essence" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26), and is used when examining the lived experiences of participants and how they interpret those experiences within the tapestry of their lives (van Manen, 1990). Van Manen (1990) explained that the phenomenological approach encourages the researcher to explore how we live in our world to better understand the world in which we live. This study employed phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of African American women superintendents. Researchers interacted directly with participants while investigating circumstances they encountered in the superintendency, empowering the researcher to analyze their interpretations and describe their perspectives (Creswell, 2007).

A transcendental phenomenological qualitative design was chosen for this study to give voice to African American women superintendents who wished to share their experiences.

Phenomenology explores a phenomenon within a group of individuals who have shared or had a similar experience (Creswell, 2013), and transcendental phenomenology examines the lived experiences of individuals experiencing a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Following Moustakas, a transcendental approach was chosen because this research study identified a phenomenon, requiring the researcher to "discover the nature and meaning of things as they appear and in their essence" (Creswell, 2013, p. 26).

In transcendental qualitative research, researchers have their own ideas and experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In an effort to differentiate my personal experiences from the participant's experiences and reduce bias, I presented my personal experiences before focusing on and analyzing the participants' interviews (Moustakas 1994). Being so personally connected to this study, I bracketed my personal experiences, as well as any collected data from others who had experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). My main form of bracketing was electronic journaling, but I also kept a small paperbound design journal with me to provide an outlet for my informal notes, research memos, and ideas during times not conducive to electronic journaling (Rubin & Rubin 2012).

Research Questions

Central Question: How do African American women describe their lived experiences in superintendent positions in the state of North Carolina?

Sub-Question 1: What specific processes or strategies were employed by participants to gain their role as a superintendent in North Carolina?

Sub-Question 2: How have the personal backgrounds of participants as black women contributed to their experiences in superintendent positions in North Carolina?

Sub-Question 3: How do participants describe the impact of their personal identity in

their experiences as a superintendent in North Carolina?

Setting

Research for this study took place in North Carolina. North Carolina is located in the southeastern region of the United States, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and four states: South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia. According to Census Bureau (2010), with a population of 10 million, North Carolina is now the 9th most populous state in the United States. North Carolina has both rural and urban areas and is divided into 100 counties with Raleigh as the capitol.

In addition to its growing population, North Carolina is home to some of the best ranked Colleges and Universities in the country. *U.S. News & World Report* (2017) ranks Duke University number eight among National Universities, Davidson College number nine among National Liberal Arts Colleges, and North Carolina at Chapel Hill number five among the top Public National Universities. Furthermore, North Carolina is home to five of the top 25 historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States: North Carolina A&T State University, North Carolina Central University, Johnson C. Smith University, Bennett College, and Elizabeth City State University. North Carolina has populous educational leadership programs, and several of the programs are currently at maximum capacity and not accepting additional students. This rich academic atmosphere was one of the reasons North Carolina was chosen for this research study.

Similar studies have been conducted in North Carolina but from a quantitative perspective, and ultimately, many of these studies recommended further investigation in order to gain a greater sense of the phenomenon. Wiley (2014) completed a qualitative study in the state of Texas, however, her sample was quite limited as only a small number of African American

women superintendents were present; experiencing such limitations, she ultimately suggested broadening the setting. Completing this study in North Carolina, therefore, augmented existing research.

Participants

The goal of this study was to explore how African American women describe their lived experiences in superintendent positions in the state of North Carolina. The participants chosen for this study encompassed 10 of the 15 African American women superintendents in North Carolina from the past five years. The population was comprised of certified superintendents with at least one year of experience in the North Carolina superintendency.

Due to the nature of this research, purposeful sampling was used. Creswell (2013) stated, "the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (p. 156). Research participants in phenomenological research studies are selected based on their experience of the given phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, participants were comprised of 10 currently serving African American women public school superintendents or recent former African American women public school superintendents (within the past five years). According to Creswell (2013), the use of 10 participants, or until data saturation has been reached, is justifiable in a transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research. Once participants were chosen for this study, researchers gleaned further demographic information (age, school district, education level, etc.), however, given the nature of qualitative research, confidentiality was tantamount, and pseudonyms comprised of letters correlating to the alphabet were assigned to each superintendent upon their agreement to participate.

Names of qualifying participants were identified via the North Carolina superintendent

database, which features a comprehensive list of current superintendents with pictures and district names. In addition, the North Carolina School Superintendent Association provided a comprehensive list of North Carolina superintendents for the past five years. Supplementary names of past superintendents were secured via snowball sampling after an explanation of the research was given to potential participants identified via the database. The pool of potential participants was 15. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique used by researchers to locate potential participants in studies where participants are hard to locate (Patton, 2015). Researchers use this sampling method when the sample for the study is rare or is limited to a very small subgroup of the population (Patton, 2015). Potential participants were asked qualifying questions for a research study for African American women superintendents.

Procedures

The first step in completing this research was to obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University. Once approved (see Appendix A), the search for potential participants began. Potential participants were identified via the North Carolina School Superintendents database, which lists each North Carolina district's superintendent, along with a photograph and contact information. This information was used to contact potential participants. Past superintendents were also identified and contacted via the snowball method. I also formatted a social media post to recruit potential participants via Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other social media sites. Once potential participants were identified, I sent them information regarding the study along with my contact information. (see Appendix B). After electing to participate, confirmed participants received a consent form to review and sign (see Appendix C). Once completed consent forms were secured, and I arranged individual interviews with each participant. I called each participant and followed up with an email and a calendar invite that

included the agreed upon date, time, and place of our interview; I also shared basic interview questions in advance (see Appendix D). Each participant completed one interview which was recorded using at least two methods. The one-on-one interviewing process allowed participants to answer questions based on their own experiences without being persuaded by the opinion of others. The interviews were held at a neutral location, such as a local library or the interviewee's office. Since most participants were located in the state of North Carolina, face to face interviews were held, when possible. When a face to face interview was not possible, I used FaceTime, Skype, WebEx, or completed a phone conference, depending on the access available to the interviewee. Sampling ended after 10 participants were interviewed since that was when theme saturation had been reached.

The interviews were conducted by me at the participant's site of choice. Each of the interviews were audio taped by me at the interviewee's site and later transcribed. I verified each transcript before the data was analyzed. I described the results in a descriptive form. The summary consisted of results from each of the letters and the online focus group along with transcribed testimonies from each interview.

Semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews use open-ended questions for audio recorded transcription (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, I took field notes during the interviews to record any noticeable non-verbal communication. Individual interviews were conducted first, followed by transcriptions, and then a meeting for member checking, which gave the interviewee the opportunity to check the accuracy of their transcribed interview.

During transcription, I asked participants to complete a few at-home assignments. The first assignment was an online focus group. Next, participants were asked to write a letter to an aspiring African American woman superintendent. All data was confidential, secured and safe.

All documents were stored in a locked file cabinet and all recordings were stored in a password-secured computer hard drive for security purposes (Creswell, 2013).

The Researcher's Role

In this research study, I was a human instrument and had a vested interest in the experiences of African American women superintendents, so this role was very important to me. I am an African American woman, wife of 13 years, and mother of two. I have a 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son, and I am also a K-12 school leader and former exceptional child teacher. The example I set for my two children, as well as for other children, is also extremely important to me. Having been an educator for 15 years and an administrator for nine, I have experience with a variety of educational settings, ranging from early childhood to higher education.

I have a vested interest in education, have attained the proper education and experience for career advancement, and it is time for me to take my career to the next level. I have a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, two Master's degrees, (Special Education and School Administration), and Specialist in Educational Leadership (Ed.S). I intend to pursue a principal position, as well as superintendent. Thus far, the journey has not been easy for me. I am currently experiencing challenges being promoted from assistant principal to principal, and I hope that learning about the experiences of African American women in the superintendency will better my understanding of future steps to take, not only for myself, but for other African American women with similar goals.

As an African American woman in education, I have had to face many obstacles. It was difficult to gain even an entry-level teaching position at the start of my career. As my career has progressed, I have had many unsettling experiences, including being stopped in the hallway and

asked for identification as well as working in schools where other teachers and coworkers were not friendly or approachable and barely spoke to me, not to mention being repeatedly bypassed for advancements. Needless to say, these experiences have shaped my beliefs, values, and biases.

Furthermore, I have a strong interest in social justice. I attended three universities that all had social justice as an intricate part of the School of Education mission. During my matriculation at those universities, I realized my fight for justice was not just about me, but about our society in general and how inequitable our system of education can be. This study examined the inequalities in the number of African American women who are currently serving or have recently served the state of North Carolina in a superintendency capacity via the lived experiences of those current and former superintendents.

It is my goal to hold a position as a superintendent one day. I am aware that this goal might create bias, but I took precautions to avoid such bias by bracketing. I bracketed electronically as well as kept a small journal with me to periodically document any notes. I am currently an assistant principal, but I do not currently work in a county with a participant as a superintendent, nor do I have relationships with any of the African American women superintendents in North Carolina that were participants. Our only known commonality is that we all worked in the state of North Carolina.

Within this study, the role of the researcher was to interview participants one-on-one and gather data through the observation of instructional coaching sessions. During the interviews and observations, a rapport was established with the participants in efforts to gather the most authentic thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. To establish a relationship, educational background and the purpose of the study were exposed. Participants were asked to share their honest

thoughts within the study. Participants were reminded that their responses are confidential and not reported as their own personal quotes within the reporting of the findings.

Data Collection

There are several methods that can be used for data collection in qualitative research. Some of the most popular include interviewing and document analysis (Creswell, 2013). This study required data triangulation. Schwandt (2007) defines triangulation as a procedure used to establish validity. Triangulation is used to check the integrity of the inferences the researcher draws (Schwandt, 20017). The purpose of triangulation is to draw a conclusion from more than one vantage point (Schwandt, 2007). The strategy of triangulation operates on the assumption that data collected from different sources will be aggregated to show the truth (Schwandt, 2007). Triangulation was established in this research study using interviews, an online focus group, and Letters to an Aspiring African American Woman Superintendent. In-depth interviewing was the primary method of data collection for this study.

Interviews

Creswell (2013) said the main data collection tool used in qualitative transcendental phenomenological studies is the interview. Creswell (2013) described the interview process as an excellent tool in allowing the researcher to understand the phenomenon being studied or other experiences without directly observing the phenomenon. Individual semi-structured interviewing was the main form of data collection for this qualitative research study. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant**.** At the beginning of each interview, each participant was thanked for participating, they were provided information about the significance of the study, informed that the session would be recorded, and reassured that information would be kept confidential.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) indicated that there are three components to understanding what has been revealed during an interview:

1. Understanding is achieved by encouraging people to describe their worlds in their own terms;

2. Interviewing involves a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee that imposes obligations on both sides; and

3. The philosophy of the researcher helps define what is interesting and what is ethical and provides standards to judge the quality of the research, the humanity of the interviewing relationship and the completeness and accuracy of the write-up. (p. 70-71)

With these components in mind, I conducted individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants. I did this as often as possible, however, considering that participants are located in varying areas across the state of North Carolina, I allowed the flexibility of a Skype, Facetime, or Google chat interview. As the researcher, I was sensitive to the needs of the participants and accommodated their busy schedules in any way possible in order to maximize our interview time.

A set of questions was authentically developed, focusing on the research questions for this qualitative study (see Appendix D). "The interview process is used to generate new information and confirm or deny known information. The process is an iterative one whereby each interview informs the next and subsequent interviews are used to explore issues raised in previous interviews" (Brod et al., 2009, p. 1264). Each interview was recorded via at least two methods and later transcribed. Interviews were transcribed as best as possible to develop an accurate account of the participant responses (Brod et al., 2009). I took field notes during interviews to collect information that could not be captured via audio recording, such as body

language and expressed emotion (tears, anger, etc.). All possible measures were taken to ensure the participants were comfortable during this process. The written accounts of the interviews were cross-referenced with the sound recorded interviews to make sure there was a valid representation of the interview documented and recorded. This data was reviewed extensively prior to the review of any other data source to develop a theme from the personal beliefs and experiences of the participants. Participants were given the opportunity to review the reporting of their interviews during the member-checking process.

Interview questions.

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What kind of student were you in K-12 and in higher education?
3. What led you to the superintendency?
4. Describe the type of school district you manage.
5. How and why are you different from previous superintendents in that district?
6. What most prepared you for the superintendency, including previous roles and experiences?
7. Once you became superintendent, describe how you transformed as an educational leader.
8. Describe your support mechanisms.
9. What strengths or assets do you bring to the superintendency?
10. What challenges have you experienced as a superintendent?
11. What was your best experience as a superintendent?

12. Based on your experiences, what advice would you offer women who aspire to the superintendency in North Carolina, and how would the advice differ if it was directed towards an African American woman?

13. Why do you think there are so few African American women in the position of superintendent in North Carolina?

14. How do you think your experiences as an African American woman superintendent is/was different from men and White women in North Carolina?

Though I wanted to respect the time of each participant, I also wanted to ease into the interview, therefore, the first two questions were ice breakers. The primary intention of the questions was to focus the interview. A second intention of the questions was to assure that enough data was collected for the study. The questions started off broad, and then narrowed as the interview continued. The questions were used during the interview, but I also allowed the interview participants to guide the interview with their answers. Many of the remaining questions were all geared towards understanding the experience of the superintendents. Creswell (1998) discussed the nature of the research question. Research questions commonly start with how or what, which assisted in describing occurrences over the course of the research. Creswell (1998) continued by stating that questions should be geared towards the topic that needed to be explored. When variables cannot be easily identified, theories are not available to explain behavior of participants or their population of study, and theories need to be developed. This was the case with this study and how the interview questions were determined.

Alston's (2000) framework focused on identifying barriers and the absence of support systems for African American women, and their experiences on their journey to the superintendency were used to structure questions relative to those lived experiences. Alston

(2000) identified these barriers as: presence of the "good old boy network"; absence of support systems, sponsorships or mentors; lack of awareness of political maneuvers; societal attitudes that Black women lack competency in leadership positions; and no formal method for identifying Black aspirants to superintendent positions. While the basic questions served as the basis for all interviews, various forms of follow-up questions were asked, dependent on each participant's responses. Seidman's (1991) model of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing was used in this (Shorter-Gooden, 2004), African American women have persevered and continually defy these challenges by seeking positions traditionally held by White men, and to a lesser extent, African American men and White women (Brown, 2014).

In the state of North Carolina specifically, African American women superintendents comprise only 0.05% of active superintendents. During 2007-2008, 12 (10.43%) North Carolina superintendents were women and two (1.73%) were African American women; by 2009-2010, the growth rate for women had nearly doubled to 18.26% with 21 women holding North Carolina superintendent positions; however, African American women saw no growth (1.73%; Angel et al., 2013; NC Department of Public Instruction, 2009, 2011). Therefore, though the glass ceiling impacts all women, "gains made by White women resulting from affirmative action are not reflected for women of color" (Turner, 2002, p. 81), yet few studies provide in-depth understanding of the context of this phenomenon.

This lack of representation, research, and resources begs many questions which are the impetus for this study: Is there a place for African American women among the top leaders in K-12 education? How do African American women "seek recruitment and retention to the public school superintendency?" (Brown, 2014, p. 575-576). Who serves as mentors to African American women in a field where they are both underserved and underrepresented? And why, in

North Carolina, a state comprised of 2,048,628 African Americans ((“suburbanstats,” n.d.) are fewer than 1% of superintendents African American women? Therefore, it is important to capture and share the experiences of African American women superintendents if we are to build more inclusive communities of education and eliminate the chasm that exists for minorities pursuing study to extricate additional questions. Seidman’s (1991) model encourages using the interview to establish the context of the participant’s experiences, reproduce details of the experiences, and motivate the participants to reflect on the meaning of the experiences.

Online Focus Groups

At the conclusion of each interview, I asked participants to complete homework. One homework assignment was to participate in an online focus group with other current or former African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Hatch (2002) stated that not only can focus groups be used “to supplement and enrich data from other sources” (p. 13), they also provide a valuable opportunity for researcher follow-up with the intent to make necessary corrections to interpretations. The focus group was in an online discussion board format. This format allowed study participants the opportunity to network, interact with each other and me, and substantiate my initial interpretations of the data. This semi-structured interaction among study participants and data collected during the focus group offered further generation of data. The hope was that the data would validate the theoretical categories determined after analyzing the data from each participants’ responses to the initial individual face-to-face interview questions. The online focus group was conducted using the online format Google Classroom.

Google Classroom not only provided an online discussion board for my study, but it also gave participants the opportunity to interact with each other. Participants were able to answer the questions (see Appendix E) independently, but they were also able to see others’ answers and

reply to them. I incorporated this information into the analysis section of my study. Patton (2015) suggested six types of questions for focus groups including experience and behavior questions, opinion and values questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensor questions, and background/demographic questions. Participants will answer the following questions:

Focus group questions.

1. What strengths or assets do you bring to the superintendency related to being a woman and an African American?
2. What challenges or constraints have you experienced as a superintendent related to be a woman and an African American?
3. Identify a situation that was particularly challenging for you as a superintendent. Do you think that being woman influenced how you responded? Do you think being African American influenced how you responded?
4. What motivates you to remain in the superintendent's position?
5. What three words would you use to describe yourself as a superintendent?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add to help me understand your experience as a superintendent and, specifically, the ways in which being an African American woman affects you as a superintendent?

Letter to an Aspiring African American Woman Superintendent

Letter to an Aspiring African American Woman Superintendent served as a "Things I wish I had known" letter; participants wrote letters of advice to other African American women in educational leadership who are aspiring for the superintendency. *Letters to a Young Sister* is a book by actor Hill Harper (2009) in which he draws on advice from positive women role models

and writes a series of letters to young women to help them through various challenges. Similar to these letters, this study's participants wrote a letter of advice to future African American woman superintendents, identifying possible challenges they may face along their journey to the superintendency and providing career advice to sustain them during those times.

The idea of this letter came into fruition after reading Jonathan Kozol's (2007) *Letters to a Young Teacher,* an award-winning book that has personal letters to a young teacher named Francesca about the joys and the challenges she will experience as a classroom teacher. Although Kozol (2007) wrote to an elementary school teacher, the issues that arise and the overall themes can apply to all facets of education. Just as Kozol (2007) passed along insightful information to young teachers, the current and former African American women superintendents of this study passed along insightful information to aspiring and future superintendents. Therefore, Letters to an Aspiring African American Woman Superintendent have become an additional mentoring resource for future superintendents seeking comfort and advice.

Data Analysis

The data collection process was followed by the analysis of the data. The data analysis process included finding connections between the data and categorizing information to recognize themes and patterns within the data. Coding was used to organize the data in a systematic format. The main goal was for the researcher to gain a full understanding of the data and be able to provide a written interpretation that paints a clear picture of the data and provides a true account of the experiences of the participants.

This study employed several different measures for data analysis, including but not limited to, bracketing. Bracketing was a very important part of this transcendental phenomenological research, as it required that judgment be suspended (Creswell, 2013). Since I

am an African American woman in educational leadership who has experienced racial barriers in my career, as the researcher, using bracketing assisted in eliminating my bias and ensuring that my research was valid and reliable (Moustakas, 1994). I bracketed by using a personal research journal after each interview.

Each set of data was analyzed for individual themes and then cross-referenced to find commonalities within the data from multiple sources. In the initial stages, data analysis procedures included the review of interview transcripts from written notes and audio recordings, in the initial stages. The information was used to determine common themes. Coding was done with each data collection method, to not only determine commonalities within the documents, but also between the documents. Coding categories were based on all data collected, such as interviews, observations, and researcher's memos and notes (Creswell, 2008, p. 434).

The second stage of the data analysis process involved using the themes developed in stage one to make additional connections within and between data collection documents. The purpose of this flexibility was to ensure that the true experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of the participant were preserved and captured in reporting (Creswell, 2008).

Additionally, a list of significant statements, or horizons, were gleaned from the interviews (Creswell 2013). Per Moustakas (1994), horizons were unlimited, and highlighting these statements led to an understanding of how each participant experienced the phenomenon, and thereby fostered a greater understanding of the barriers faced by each participant. All of the data analysis steps followed Moustakas (1994).

Themes

Following Moustakas (1994), after horizons were identified, themes were formed from the interview data. Horizons were grouped in clusters and themes, becoming the core thematic

labels of experience (Moustakas, 1994); Creswell (2013) referred to these larger groupings of information as "meaning units" or themes (p. 193). The techniques of describing, classifying, and interpreting data into codes and themes were imperative in this stage. Using these techniques, I formed codes or categories to build detailed descriptions, to develop themes, and to interpret the data (Creswell, 2013). These themes assisted in exploring the true experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina.

Textural Description

Upon completion of theme validation, a textural description of what happened during the phenomenon was developed (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell (2013), textual description refers to "what" the participants experienced, and for this study, there was a detailed explanation of what each participant experienced during their tenure as an African American woman superintendent. Verbatim examples from the interviews were included when determining the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1991); these examples were obtained by reading and memoing during the interview process. The technique of interpretation or abstracting meaning beyond the codes was used to make sense of the data (Creswell, 2013). Once textural descriptions were completed, structural descriptions were formed.

Structural Description

Next, the structural description of "how" the experience happened (Creswell, 2013) was identified. Structural description of the phenomenon was the combining of the textual description to form a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description relates to *what* happened during the experiences while the structural description relates to *how* the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) explained imaginative variation as looking for possible interpretations using imagination from different perspectives. Each participant was

able to share how their career progression happened; they also shared what steps they took to become superintendent and how they were promoted over the years.

The Essence

The essence is what and how the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell, 2013). The essence was determined from the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). The essence should leave the reader with an overall feeling from the experience (Creswell, 2013).

Trustworthiness

The four main perspectives of trustworthiness are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell, 2013). This study on the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina established trustworthiness by using the following validation strategies.

Credibility

In efforts to establish credibility the validation strategies the researcher used: member checking, debriefing, and triangulation. During member checking, each participant received a transcript of their interview to check for accuracy of data and conclusions drawn from the data (Creswell, 2013). If any data was inaccurate, it was corrected based on the respective participant's feedback.

I used triangulation techniques to increase the credibility of the study. Establishing validity was imperative when evaluating the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Circumstances within each district varied and each participant offered a different perspective, therefore establishing consistency. This triangulation strengthened the findings of this study.

Lastly, as an African American woman aspiring to the superintendency, I am subject to bias, therefore it was very important that I not allow my predisposition to affect the outcome of this study. The only aim was to be able to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents.

Dependability and Confirmability

I established and maintained consistency across this study so that it can be repeated and augmented in the future. One way I maintained dependability was to have an external auditor. I had a very detailed plan and secured a highly qualified auditor in the topic. An external auditor who was not part of the dissertation committee examined the research methods, data analysis, and interpretations and determined whether they were supported by the data and were accurate (Creswell, 2013).

Transferability

After the external audit, I confirmed whether my findings were transferable to other situations involving African American women superintendents. My two validation strategies included thick, rich description of the phenomenon and variation. The thick description included a detailed account of the processes and the phenomenon and allowed other researchers to determine whether my findings can be applied to similar phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Every detail was provided so that transferability was possible. Also, maximum variation increased transferability (Creswell, 2013), and I anticipated that participants in the sample would bring a variety of points from their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues could occur in the use of the qualitative approach, involving participants whose personal reflections, experiences, and opinion are used to develop a specific theory in the

research process. In order to gain trust within the data collection process, the purpose of the research was explained and the desire to use the participants to gather experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina was emphasized.

Following all ethical considerations is of utmost importance for this study. Before any interested superintendent became a participant, all required documentation was submitted to the institutional review board (IRB). The IRB letter of approval is provided in Appendix A. With the IRB's approval, interested participants received a detailed consent form. Each of the participants in the study were asked to sign an informed consent form. The letter of consent can also be found in Appendix C. The informed consent form validated voluntary participation within the research study and their responses were combined with other responses in the data reporting process. As I met with participants, I kept any and all commitments made, and was on time and prepared for all scheduled meetings. Prior to interviewing, each participant received a pseudonym comprised of letters correlating to the alphabet assigned to each superintendent as they agreed to participate, and they were referred to by that pseudonym throughout the remainder of the study to ensure participant confidentiality. Furthermore, all data was stored either on a password secured computer or in a locked cabinet (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

Chapter Three reviews the research design to provide an understanding of African American women superintendent experiences in North Carolina. Interview questions were explained in detail, as well as study setting and participants. Data collection methods; semi-structured interviews, online focus group, and Letter to an Aspiring African American Woman Superintendent were described in detail. Chapter Three concluded with a reassurance of a credible and viable study, along with participant rights' and confidentiality.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to identify factors that impacted African American women in the superintendency. This method of research was chosen to describe the experiences of African American women in North Carolina. Chapter Four addresses the findings of this study. The detailed research methodology was provided in Chapter Three where it was noted that three different data collection methods helped determine answers to the research questions including interviews, a focus group, and letters to aspiring AA women superintendents. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research investigates how individuals understand and frame their life experiences. Specifically, qualitative research methods can shed light on experiences of AA women in the superintendency. Chapter Four reveals the findings of the data analysis conducted through coding and identifying emerging themes from the individual interviews, the online focus groups, and the letters to aspiring AA women superintendents. Data analysis was sequential and iterative and took place over a seven-month timeframe. The data collection and analysis revealed three themes including:

1. Factors based on personal strength and integrity
2. Factors based on expectations
3. Factors based on challenges

The qualitative research was guided by the following research questions:

Central Question: How do African American women describe their lived experiences in superintendent positions in the state of North Carolina?

Sub-Question 1**:** What specific processes or strategies were employed by participants to gain their role as a superintendent in North Carolina?

Sub-Question 2**:** How have the personal backgrounds of participants as black women contributed to their experiences in superintendent positions in North Carolina?

Sub-Question 3**:** How do participants describe the impact of their personal identity in their experiences as a superintendent in North Carolina?

Participants

At the onset of this study, 17 African American women superintendents of K-12 school districts in North Carolina met the criteria for participation. Each of these 17 women were either currently serving as a superintendent with at least one year of experience in the North Carolina superintendency currently or had served as a North Carolina superintendent within the past five years. Ten superintendents were available and agreed to participate in this study; of the seven superintendents who did not participate, six never responded to correspondence requesting their participation; the seventh agreed but was later released from her superintendent role and could not participate due to a non-disclosure agreement. It was not surprising that approximately half of the initially-identified sample were able to participate due to such extreme time constraints inevitable in the work of a school superintendent. The superintendents who were most flexible were those who had retired or who were involved in other work such as teaching at a university or consulting. Due to the small number of African American women superintendents in North Carolina, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect her identify. To further protect participants from being identified, other demographic history was not requested as a part of this study. The demographic information that is shared about each participant was shared willingly by the participant during the interviews.

Amanda

Superintendent Amanda began her career as a fifth-grade teacher in Apple County and has experienced much success in public education in North Carolina over the past 13 years. Prior to her current superintendency role, Superintendent Amanda previously served as director of a secondary curriculum data base, a global schools coordinator, a principal, assistant principal, and instructional technology specialist for the Apple County Schools as well as an educational consultant for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), managing the statewide instructional improvement system, learning management system, and digital content. Additionally, she has also served as a principal mentor for a state university. The program is offered to coach principals on the application of technology in their schools.

Superintendent Amanda has an impressive academic background, including a bachelor's degree in elementary education from a North Carolina university, which she attended as a North Carolina Teaching Fellow. She went on to obtain master's degrees in curriculum and instruction. and educational administration from an out of state private university. She does not hold a doctoral degree which sets her apart from all other participants. She has a host of family and friends in Apple County which make her passion for the education of this community a priority. In her interview, Superintendent Amanda stated:

> An education is one of the most important gifts you can offer a person. I am truly honored and humbled to serve as an educational leader for the students and staff in Apple County. It takes a community to ensure the fulfillment of our students' hopes and dreams. As a former Apple County Schools graduate, I am ecstatic about doing all that I can to support and empower our students to obtain the future they desire. (Amanda, personal interview, 2018)

Beth

Dr. Beth's career in public education has spanned over 20 years in North Carolina. She began her career in public education leadership as an assistant principal and principal in two very small towns in northern central North Carolina, and since 2016, she has served as the assistant superintendent for teaching, learning, and leadership for the North Carolina Public Schools. Prior to her current position, Dr. Beth served as an area superintendent for North Carolina Public Schools as well as a school transformation coach with NCDPI.

Dr. Beth has an impressive academic background, including a bachelor's degree in English education from a historically Black college or university in North Carolina. She continued her education by obtaining a master's degree in educational administration and supervision from another public university in North Carolina and a doctorate in educational leadership from an additional public university in North Carolina. She also participated in and later served as a consultant and assistant director for the Principals' Executive Program. Dr. Beth is married to an attorney and they are the proud parents of a daughter who is an ACC scholar track and field athlete and a Senior at a public NC University.

Cathy

Dr. Cathy began her career in 1994 in a western NC County and spent 13 years there as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. She also worked as a districtwide academically gifted program teacher, receiving many honors, including county teacher of the year, assistant principal of the year, and principal of the year. She went on to work as associate superintendent for auxiliary services in another western NC county public school system, where she oversaw transportation, after-school care, child nutrition, federal programs, and gifted education. Her most recent job was as assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction in another western NC public school system.

Dr. Cathy grew up in western NC where she was an honors graduate. She received her bachelor of science degree from a public university in Greensboro, a master's degree in elementary education from a public university in Charlotte, a master's in arts from a private university in NC, and her doctorate of educational leadership from a public university in Charlotte in 2007.

Dr. Cathy understands the challenges of education in the 21st century. Children have access to unlimited information via the internet, and the challenge, she says, is to help them sort and process what they learn independently. "Before the internet, adults had more control over what children learned," she said. "Today, we as adults have to be able to talk to them about what they've seen and heard" (Cathy, personal interview, 2018). With a vision for all students to learn and become productive adults, Dr. Cathy also believes that education cannot be accomplished by considering only a child's academic ability, but must also be holistic. According to Dr. Cathy, Educators have to see each child as a sum of his or her environment, abilities, family, and emotional and physical health.

Dana

Dr. Dana began her career in education directly after finishing college in 1980 and announced her plans to retire July 1, 2015 after 35 years of service in the North Carolina school system. She began her career as a speech pathologist, but seven years later, she began to explore various roles in educational leadership, advancing untraditionally to the superintendency. At the age of 29, she became an assistant principal, and was subsequently promoted to director of programs for exceptional children, assistant superintendent, and associate superintendent for administrative services before reaching her culminating role as a superintendent of public education in North Carolina. She never held a position as a principal, nor did she have

classroom teaching experience. Dr. Dana obtained her undergraduate degree in communication disorders from a private university in Virginia and her masters and doctorate from a public university in North Carolina.

Dr. Dana reported that her biggest challenge was the color of her skin. She continued stating that her second biggest challenge was being a female in a male-oriented field. Dr. Dana said:

> You really had to prove yourself, you had to always go in and you had to be very knowledgeable of what you were talking about and always be on your A game. And so I think the biggest challenge was that they had to get past the blackness, especially being the fact that you're a female. (Dana, personal interview, 2018)

Eva

A former chief academic and digital learning officer and public school superintendent, Dr. Eva was selected by the North Carolina State Board of Education to be the new Deputy State Superintendent. Dr. Eva's extensive experience as a local superintendent and also as a state education leader has served local school districts well. She understands the critical role of collaboration and ongoing communication with local districts and schools.

In addition to her professional roles at the state education agency and in North Carolina's public schools, Dr. Eva has held various other positions in educational leadership in other states. She served as the principal of an intermediate school as well as the director of research and staff development for a public school system in Texas and was recognized as the Middle School Principal of the Year for another state. She was also the chief academic officer for a public school system in Philadelphia and the assistant superintendent for a public school system in Louisiana.

Dr. Eva received a bachelor's degree in English and speech and a master's degree in organizational communication, both were earned at a public out-of-state university. She obtained a Doctor of Philosophy in educational administration from another public university in a different state. Dr. Eva graduated from an out-of-state State Superintendent Academy, making her trajectory a bit unique.

Fran

Dr. Fran has over 25 years of experience in public education spanning various roles, including high school math teacher, assistant principal, principal of a redesign high school, program director at a state New Schools Project, director of educational leadership, and area superintendent. Her career accolades include serving as her district's District Transformation Coach Team Lead as well as the Lead for NCDPI, which included spearheading efforts to improve educational outcomes for underperforming students and turn around low-performing schools; she ultimately led her team to receive the State Superintendent's Team Leadership Award in 2012. Prior to her superintendency, she served as the director and executive coach of a leadership academy and school transformation at a North Carolina state university where she provided professional development, coaching, and technical assistance to aspiring school leaders in high need schools. Dr. Fran earned a bachelor's in mathematics education from a public university in North Carolina. She received her masters and doctoral degrees in educational administration and supervision from a different North Carolina public university, where she also received a notable doctoral fellowship for public school administrators.

Gale

Dr. Gale has enjoyed a successful career in public education spanning over 17 years in North Carolina. Prior to accepting her current superintendency post, Dr. Gale served as

superintendent of a western NC school system, assistant superintendent of a southern North Carolina public school system, and director of teaching and learning for an eastern North Carolina public school system. She began her career in public education as a lateral entry high school science teacher and has also served as a middle and high school assistant principal and principal, high school science teacher and athletic coach along her career journey. Dr. Gale received her bachelor's degree in biology from a public out-of-state university. She went on to obtain a master's degree in school administration from a public university in North Carolina and a doctorate in educational leadership and administration from another public university in North Carolina.

Holly

Dr. Holly became superintendent of Happy City Schools (pseudonym) in 2015 and held several positions along her path to the superintendency. Prior to moving to North Carolina, she served as a coordinator and assistant principal in Virginia. Afterwards, she accepted a principalship in North Carolina, and later an executive director position in an urban North Carolina public school system.

A native of Virginia, Dr. Holly completed her post-secondary education at an out-of-state public university where she earned a bachelor's in business education. Later she earned a master's in educational leadership at a different out-of-state public university. She also completed her doctorate at an out-of-state public university in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. When asked about advice she would give others, Dr. Holly said:

> I would say first of all develop tough skin, because, although you know a woman knows what it takes or what it will take to get the job done, people are always going to see the woman as not as strong as they would a man. (Holly, personal interview, 2018)

Ida

Dr. Ida began her career as a mathematics teacher and volleyball and basketball coach for a North Carolina public school system in 1991. As her career developed, she became founding principal of a school (Early College), and Idea County Schools (pseudonym) named her 2011-12 Principal of the Year for her stint as principal there. She went on to serve as chief academic officer in a small rural public school system prior to being named superintendent of Idea County Schools.

She was born in a southern NC military town as part of a military family and describes herself as a military brat, having lived in several states in her youth, including Texas and North Dakota; her family was even stationed in the Philippines for some time. Dr. Ida is married to a middle school and high school math teacher in Virginia and a reservist in the United States military. They have two children. Dr. Ida completed her undergraduate studies at a public out-of-state university. She obtained her master's and doctoral degrees from a public university in North Carolina.

Jamie

Dr. Jamie became Superintendent of Justice County Schools (pseudonym) in 2015. She began her career as a fifth grade teacher and has held various roles along her trajectory to the superintendency, including assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent of human resources. Overall, she has more than 25 years of experience in education, with over nine years of central office experience.

Dr. Jamie received both her bachelor's degree in intermediate education and her master's in school administration from a public university in North Carolina. She later obtained her doctorate in education from her alma mater as well. Dr. Jamie has often been recognized for her

scholarship and leadership throughout her career, and has even been inducted into her alma mater's Educators Hall of Fame. She has served on local and state committees as well as many non-profit organizations such as the Coalition for Substance Abuse and the Community College Diversity Committee.

Table 1 consist of demographic information for research study participants.

Table 1

Summary Profile Matrix of Interviewees

Interviewee	Superintendent Pseudonym	County Pseudonym	Doctoral Degree	Traditional Advancement
1	Amanda	Apple County	No	Yes
2	Beth	Bear County	Yes	Yes
3	Cathy	Cab County	Yes	Yes
4	Dana	Diamond County	Yes	No
5	Eva	Elephant County	Yes	Yes
6	Fran	Fire County	Yes	Yes
7	Gale	Giant County	Yes	Yes
8	Holly	Happy City Schools	Yes	Yes
9	Ida	Idea County	Yes	Yes
10	Jamie	Justice County	Yes	Yes

*Traditional advancement is defined as advancing through the role of teacher, principal, associate superintendent, other district leadership, and superintendent.

Results

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of African American women in superintendent positions in North Carolina public schools. This phenomenological research used three specific data collection methods including interviews, a focus group, and a letter to aspiring AA women superintends. Interviews and focus groups questions (see Appendices D and E) were developed to align with the central research

question guiding this study. Additionally, specific questions were asked to include the sub-questions. For the purpose of this study, participants were purposefully selected based on the criteria given above. A list of names was pulled from the North Carolina State Board of Education (NCBOE) and an email was sent to each AA women that met the criteria. The NCBOE provided a list of superintendents from the past five years. This information was used to communicate with these participants and a snowballing effect was used to make additional connections.

Participants were asked to contribute in an online focus group with other current or former African American women superintendents in North Carolina. The focus group was in an online discussion board format using Google Classroom, which allowed participants to interact together online. Participants were able to answer the questions independently and see others' answers and reply to them. This allowed for substantiation of initial data interpretations from the interviews. The data further validated the theoretical categories determined after analyzing the data from the individual interview questions.

Letter to an Aspiring African American Woman Superintendent served as a "Things I wish I had known" letter; participants wrote letters of advice to other African American women in educational leadership who are aspiring for the superintendency. These were meant to identify possible challenges and offer advice to the aspiring leaders that they might face while aspiring to become a superintendent. The letters offered wisdom about becoming a superintendent and how to handle serving as a superintendent, which further triangulated the data from the interviews and online focus group.

Theme Development

Themes were developed and then identified via data analysis which included identifying and developing patterns, themes, codes, and content analysis. Qualitative data analysis is emergent (Gall at al., 2007). This means that what the researcher learns when collecting data is often used to determine later data collection methods or activities. This occurred in my research. When I investigated the North Carolina Board of Education website, I discovered that only current superintendents were listed. This caused me to look for other means of obtaining information about past superintendents. I then used snowballing to find participants who had served as superintendents in the past. Data collection and recording included the use of memoing, bracketing, open coding, enumeration, and member checking to identify themes

throughout the data collection process and to ensure triangulation and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2013).

Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4 provide a visual display of the open codes, properties, and significant statements for each of the research sub questions.

Table 2

Research Sub-Question One: What specific processes or strategies were employed by participants to gain their role as a superintendent in North Carolina?

Open Code	Properties	Examples of participants words
Personal Strength	Prayer Integrity knowing yourself	Experiences with students have been magical to me Those experiences have been the best part of this job It is, to me, really life or death for kids understanding that this is important work This is the best thing that we can do to serve others I always have and still do pray a lot have that strong faith we're serving the community
Expectations	high expectations education experience community expectations mothering expectations internal expectations external expectations	I treat these children like they're my own. community expects Black women to take care of their kids mindset of it takes a village to raise a child many times when meeting Black families they make comments like" oh good, you can take care of my baby" there is also an internal expectation that we put on ourselves We believe in taking care of our families and our community I used to keep bottled water, pop tarts, crackers, and noodles in my office for kids when they told me they were hungry.
Challenges	timing family demands perception of "the other" being an outsider not knowing people, being the other race being the other sex school board support system twice as hard	comments and contributions are often overlooked or dismissed lack of respect from others often not well-received I have to be very cautious in how I say things Males can do and say things we cannot I have the nerve to be a girl and Black you're not expected to go against the grain

Table 3

Research Sub-Question Two: How have the personal backgrounds of participants as African American women contributed to their experiences in superintendent positions in North Carolina?

Open Code	Properties	Examples of participants words
Personal Strength	self-knowledge purpose integrity genuine concern	desire to positively impact all students in their care form of activism Faith and prayer
Expectations		we're in this for our children importance of professional development I attend those conferences nine of the 10 participants had completed a doctoral program leadership and communication skills
Challenges		in North Carolina there is still a mindset about who ought to lead districts culture of the state don't go for a county that you can't be yourself in

Table 4

Research Sub-Question Three: How do participants describe the impact of their personal identity in their experiences as a superintendent in North Carolina?

Open Code	Properties	Examples of participants words
Personal Strength		know yourself and your leadership style stay true to what I know is the right thing to do for students measurable student impact lasting connections with the community experiences with students have been magical to me experience in Algebra I the best thing that we can do to serve others
Expectations		I have some extra super high expectations for people because I treat these children like they're my own
Challenges		I'm an outsider

Coding continued and was an integral part of the data analysis as it became the foundation for interpreting the data when patterns developed that generated themes. Themes emerged and further validated the ideas that were common to the participants.

To confirm the emerging themes, codes, and phrases from the participants' perspectives and each of the three data collection methods, Moustakas's (1994) data analysis process was used for data analysis in this transcendental phenomenological research. The process consists of seven steps. The first step in the process was horizontalization. During this step, I reviewed interview transcripts highlighting expressions related to the participant's experience. The next step consisted of reduction and elimination, where the expressions that were insignificant to the horizonal experiences were removed. Overlapping, obscure, or repetitive expressions were either deleted or relayed in more precise terms during this step.

Steps three through five are part of the variation phase of the research method. The third step consisted of compiling the significant expressions identified during the horizontalization process and classifying them into core themes. During step four, the themes are validated through another review of the participant's transcripts. If themes are unaligned to the transcripts during this step, those themes are deleted. In step five, textual descriptions are written concerning the experiences of the participants and direct quotes from the participant transcripts are included.

During step six, themes were generated based on how participants expressed their experience as well as where the experience was expressed. The last step of the data analysis process was the synthesis phase of transcendental phenomenology. In this step, textural and structural descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon were constructed through the merging of themes identified in steps five and six. By combining these themes, the essence of the experience is highlighted, focusing on what the participants experienced and how they experienced it.

I started the data analysis process by describing my personal experience related to the phenomenon investigated in this study. This was my way of bracketing out my personal experience as an African American woman working in educational leadership in North Carolina so that I could analyze the data with an open mind. I then reviewed each transcript to gain an understanding of each superintendent's story. Next, I developed a list of the significant statements that were presented from the data gathered through the participant interviews, online focus group, and letters to an aspiring superintendent. These statements were focused on providing information of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. This was the horizontilization of the data. Next, a list of non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements were

developed. During the third step, the significant statements from step two were grouped into themes. Next, a description of what the participants experienced with the phenomenon was developed. This textural description, a description of what happened, included quotes and examples from the data collection process. During the next step, a description of how the experience occurred was developed. This structural description focused on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced. Lastly, the researcher wrote a description of the phenomenon that incorporated both the textural and structural descriptions. This description was the essence of the experience and shared what phenomenon the participants in the study experienced and how they experienced it.

Three data collection methods were used to triangulate the data including interviews, a focus group, and letters to aspiring AA women superintendents. Yin (2009) stated that triangulation of the data is the most important aspect of qualitative data analysis and is used to determine constant data in carrying contexts. All three data collection methods were critically reviewed to identify and develop codes, patterns, and themes. Codes were categorically aggregated, and theme were formed based on multiple repeating occurrences of important phrases and key words. Content analysis included memoing, bracketing, open coding, enumeration, and member checking to identify themes.

A variety of themes emerged and were grouped into three major thematic ideas. Each of the major themes appeared in each of the participant interviews. In triangulating the data as described above, the following themes emerged:

1. Factors based on personal strength and integrity: These factors were made evident in the interviews and well as the focus group. A belief in a higher power was consistent with each of the participants. Another source of strength and integrity was the

participants' families. Each participant mentioned the importance of knowing your strengths. Cathy said, "In all situations, know your strengths, know who you are, and just know that there are going to be times that people make assumptions about you just on the way that you look." Jamie described one of her strengths as being able to help the community see her vision. She says, "I know how to talk to people and how to guide and coach people into their appropriate roles." In her letter, Gale said she relied on her prayer time and discussed why it was vital in her current role and life. She encouraged aspiring superintendents to make time for themselves.

2. Factors based on expectations: Each of the participants had a connection to her community whether it was the community where she grew up or the community to which she has dedicated her service. This connection led to high expectations. The letters as well as the focus group revealed that the expectations could be internal and external. For example, Amanda grew up in the town she serves and she was intentional in seeking her position there to help her community and the families that live there. The community had very high expectations for her. In her interview, Amanda said, "I just want to be very involved in what is happening in my community. She felt personally responsible for the education of the children in her community. Ida discussed her expectations as well. She had high expectations for herself and in turn had high expectations for students and staff. Ida stated, "I was told my expectations were very different than any other superintendent who had sat in that seat.
3. Factors based on challenges: Every participant discussed challenges in their role. The challenges were mostly discussed in the interviews and the focus group. Within those

challenges all of them mention the school board. Gale stated, "I communicate with seven very different individuals and get them all to the same place has been a challenge-- I feel like sometimes it slows the work down more than I want to be slowed down." For Fran, her challenge was her race. She said, "Number one, the number one challenge is the color of my skin." Another challenge was implementing change. Amanda was planning to close a very small neighborhood school and she was met with a lot of adversity.

For data analysis, three themes were identified which answered sub-questions. The data collection from these sources were used to validate the themes identified and were then used to answer the central research question.

Research Question Responses

A hallmark of transcendental phenomenological research is that is seeks to explore the lived experiences of participants (Merriam, 2009). In order to do so, three methods of data collection were utilized including interviews, an online focus group, and letters to aspiring superintendents. Responses to questions utilizing all three methods of data collection are presented in this section.

Central question. The central question for this research study was, "How do African American women describe their lived experiences in superintendent positions in the state of North Carolina?" Responses varied depending on each participants' trajectory, but included personal strength and integrity, higher standards and expectations, a baseline requirement of a doctorate degree and extensive exposure to various levels of training.

Factors Based on Personal Strength and Integrity. Personal strength and integrity emerged as a leading theme regarding how participants approached their individual paths to the

superintendency, as well as their service during their tenure in the role. Participants stressed the importance of integrity, indicating the value of self-knowledge and staying true to the message and purpose of their intended work. That integrity extended to a genuine concern for and desire to positively impact all students in their care, as well as the surrounding community--a trait exemplified by all participants.

Each participant stressed a genuine, if not heartfelt, interest in making measurable student impact and lasting connections with the community. For example, Fran wrote in her letter to an aspiring African American superintendent that the students needed her and that her job was to make a difference in education so that students could be served to the best of her ability (see Table 2). She went on to say that she could do that by doing what was best for the student and by being herself. All 10 participants reverenced the weight and social responsibility of their role, understanding that they had been entrusted with the community's most precious resources--their children, their future--and that their impact would extend far beyond the local community. Each had pursued the path to superintendency with activism in mind--mainly being advocates for children. The job entailed serving and protecting the children in their community, but participants reported extending that responsibility beyond the profession, viewing themselves as personally accountable. While emphasizing the incredible social responsibility of the office's scope of work, Superintendent Gale best demonstrated this in saying, "This is the best thing that we can do to serve others, which means we're serving the community--well, we're serving the world, we are creating the next whatever" (see Table 4). She also said, "I have some extra super high expectations for people because I treat these children like they're my own" (see Table 2) Patricia Hill-Collins refers to this ownership and responsibility to biologically unrelated children as "other-mothering", a form of socially responsible individualism practiced by highly educated

African American women toward all African American children. This sentiment is echoed throughout the focus group. For example, Amanda stated that she considered it a strength that, as a female, she felt a sense of motherly collaboration and expectation. Additionally, Ida stated that she felt a sense of "relatability towards the children and staff who see our race in a leadership role." Largely due to their sense of responsibility to the African American community, community other mothers "not only feel accountable to their own kin, they experience a bond with all of the Black community's children" (Hill, 2000, p. 189).

Superintendent Holly echoed African American women superintendents' passion for child advocacy, stating:

> In North Carolina, there are very few African American female superintendents, but as I think about each and every one of them, I think about personal conversations with them and how intelligent, strong and passionate they are about this type of work . . . Typically an African American female superintendent really is in this job for the right reason, and I kind of feel that from every African American superintendent--female superintendent--that I've had a conversation with--we are in this for the right reason, and we're in this for our children. (Holly, personal interview, 2018)

Participants considered their work in education a form of activism, seemingly inspired by Gloria Wade-Gayles (1993), who stated "if revolutionaries are people who work to change a system, to bring it down, black teachers were quiet revolutionaries in our communities" (p. 8-9). This advocacy extended to how participants viewed their work within and for their districts. For example, in the online focus group, Amanda said that the impact she has in her community is important because she is from that community and cares about the people in it. They seemed to understand, like bell hooks, that:

> The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (bell hooks, 1994, p. 207)

Superintendent Gale also recommended maintaining a sense of humor while making an impact:

> It is, to me, really life or death for kids . . . as a doctor might kill them, we don't kill them, but we make them the walking dead if we don't do this right . . . understanding that this is important work that we do but we cannot take ourselves so seriously that we cannot laugh and enjoy. (Gale, personal interview, 2018)

In addition to maintaining a sense of humor, participants agreed on the importance of knowing yourself, your leadership style and staying on message. "Now that I'm in this seat and I have to make those decisions, it's more of, for me, to stay true to what I know is the right thing to do for students" (Fran, personal interview, 2018; see Table 4). The majority of participant's most memorable moments were of an interpersonal nature. For Superintendent Dana, her best experience stemmed from her winning the confidence and trust of the school district, including all students, parents and staff, while Superintendent Gale's best experiences surrounded interfacing with those directly impacted by her decisions, her students, stating, "All of those experiences with students have been magical to me, and so I would say any of those experiences have probably been the best part of this job" (see Table 2) (Gale, personal interview, 2018).

Superintendent Fran shared a moving personal story regarding how she came to value student impact as well as how she experienced the importance of parental advocacy firsthand. In eighth grade, she enrolled in Algebra I, a class reserved for gifted students, only to fail the class,

not due to lack of effort or application, but because she could not see the board from her seat in the rear of the classroom. Unfortunately, her teacher never asked why she was underperforming, and Superintendent Fran's parents assumed the teacher was highly equipped to assess and meet her needs. Not only did her parents never come to her school, when she tried to explain to her mother that she simply could not see the board, her mother replied, "Oh no, the teacher knows exactly what you need, you just go to school, you behave, and the teacher will do what's best for you." Fran did not get the help that she needed that year, and based on her 8th grade grades, she had to retake Algebra I via two classes (Algebra IA and Algebra IB) over the course of the next two years. Her ninth-grade teacher recognized that she was excelling, even finishing before the rest of the class; the difference: in the ninth-grade class, Fran's seat assignment was in the front of the classroom where she could see the board. Her 10th grade Algebra IB teacher noticed her stellar performance as well, but rather than have her waste another year on material she could easily master, the teacher asked Fran to double up on her math and take Algebra IB and Geometry simultaneously to make up for lost time. The 10th grade teacher was so confident in Fran's math skills that she even took her to a math contest that year. Witnessing firsthand the dramatic difference her parents could have made had they taken a more active role in her education, combined with the impact one caring educator made, this pivotal experience of parental involvement and teacher advocacy inspired Superintendent Fran to pursue the superintendency to become an agent of change for children who otherwise would not have an advocate.

Experiencing this firsthand, Superintendent Fran grew to understand that her parents were far from alone in their lack of engagement, and that often parents who are not engaged, particularly parents with limited education, simply do not feel empowered to advocate for their

children. Many parents are undereducated themselves and assume that the school will fill the gap for their children, resulting in their lack of engagement. With that activism deeply ingrained in her work as her career progressed, she made it her goal to pursue the superintendency to positively influence children's opportunities of getting a quality education irrespective of their parents' level of education, income or their address within the community.

Factors Based on Expectations. According to participants, candidates for superintendency that are African American women are held to significantly higher standards of experience and education than their peers. Some of those standards are self-imposed, but most include expectations of colleagues, the community, the district, and many outsiders. Additionally, participants reported generally being held to different standards than their colleagues while pursuing the office, like having to meet higher qualifications prior to even being considered for the superintendent role. Participant Ida noted that she had served in every position in the central office except for the Director of Title IX, yet she did not immediately get the job when she applied for the superintendency. Beyond post-education, preparatory programs and professional experience, such abnormally high standards also later extended to their performance in the superintendent role.

While the importance of having matriculated educational leadership programs was a given, three participants referenced superintendent training programs and professional development consortiums beyond their collegiate studies, like the Aspiring Superintendents Program. Superintendent Jamie described such programs as intensive administrative leadership preparatory programs that highlighted leadership styles and prepared candidates for the interview process by exposing them to "different people, different resources, different learning styles."

> We did the political frame, the human resources frame, all of the framework and then we interviewed, had mock interviews with different people. (A leader in the School Board Association) came down and talked with us about the qualities that districts looked for, and then we also had a coach. They would come and coach us after we finished the program and the goal was to help get you out there. (Jamie, personal interview, 2018)

Mentors were imbedded in such programs, as well as a cohort of fellow emerging superintendents with which to grow and expand--camaraderie that could further inform their collective career trajectory. However, though the School Board Association and School Administrators Association were easily accessible, other such training programs were not readily available to all participants. The superintendent consortium was located in a specific corridor of the state and only available to superintendents in participating counties, while the training programs cited were largely located out of state.

While some participants credited the strategic thinking garnered from motherhood and managing high schools as exceptional preparation for the superintendency, nearly all participants noted the importance of varied roles that provide a broader perspective of district operations and administration beyond classroom curriculum and instruction. Nine out of 10 of the participants had followed a fairly traditional route to the superintendency. They cited exposure to state and local politics, budgeting, and particularly, human resources as key to their preparation and ultimately, their ability to navigate the position well.

Overall, seeking exposure to as many facets of district operations and administration as possible was the most strongly recommended approach. Superintendent Fran's background spanned over a decade of classroom teaching, supporting assistant principal and principal roles, a district transformation coach/area superintendent role, and working side by side with a

superintendent ("helping make decisions, pulling data, helping the community understand what we were doing, reporting back to the courts, reporting back to the state board") provided a much broader view that she believed best prepared her for her superintendency. Having served at the Central Office for nearly a decade before becoming a superintendent, Superintendent Cathy felt she had a panoramic perspective to draw from. Similarly, Superintendent Beth emphasized the importance of broad practical training:

> I can't imagine people who don't experience different roles and have different challenges in education before they sit here because too much comes too fast every day...the only way I know to make those decisions is because I've lived it. Had I not had those other experiences, I don't know that I would have been as well prepared to do the work that I have to do every day. (Beth, personal interview, 2018)

The variety in exposure noted by participants was not limited to the position's perspective and scope of work but also extended to the size and scale of the environment. For instance, Superintendent Holly came into her role as superintendent of Happy City Schools, a small rural district, having worked in various capacities in much larger districts. Prior to her arrival in Happy City Schools, the opportunities available to students were limited in both scope and quantity--almost non-existent. Having experienced success in impacting student achievement in the larger districts, Superintendent Holly found that she not only had higher expectations but also a much grander vision for Happy City Schools. With her perspective and leadership, Happy City Schools now has a broader approach to education and offers opportunities on par with districts twice its size, like the Spanish Immersion Program, one of many new programs initiated by Superintendent Holly.

Participants broadly heralded human resources experience for its exposure to the inner workings of every department within the district, and many participants found the role's ability to promote well roundedness beyond school administration and curriculum and instruction very beneficial in their superintendency, if not their biggest strength. Superintendent Amanda cited the importance of diplomacy and an ability to guide and coach people into their appropriate roles as her biggest strength, all skills gleaned from working in human resources. Superintendent Jaime stated that broad knowledge of a variety of areas led her to the superintendency, while crediting her experience in human resources with getting her the job:

> When you work in Human Resources you deal with every department, so I think my well roundedness of being able to know about curriculum..., evaluate principals, develop community partnerships, work with students, I think really put me at a point where I was considered to run the district. (Jamie, personal interview, 2018)

Once in the role, Superintendent Dana emphasized the importance of professional development and conferences to keep up with shifts in curriculum and law. Even though she had an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, as the educational leader, she realized that she still needed to stay informed of curriculum updates lest she be caught off guard in a board meeting; as a result, she began to immerse herself in curriculum and attend curriculum meetings as well. Superintendent Beth echoed the need to stay informed:

> I always attend school law updates by the school boards association because I've got to stay on my game with law, got to make sure my board understands law. You don't want to be the one not knowing the right thing to do so I make sure I attend those conferences. (Beth, personal interview, 2018)

This substantiates the higher standards required of African American women superintendents previously mentioned.

Factors Based on Challenges. African American women may face more challenges than other women because they may be more isolated from professional social networks. This sense of isolation originates with the lack of mentorship from other African American women superintendents. Often times, men will sponsor other men through established networks, this creates barriers for women but place even greater constraints on women of color, who are often not members of traditional networking groups.

A doctorate degree appeared to be a minimum requirement for African American women pursuing the superintendency in North Carolina. This requirement presented a challenge for some. Nine of the 10 participants held doctorate degrees prior to being offered their superintendency positions, and the outlier held the required state superintendent certification, was enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of her offer and is currently completing her program. Some reported having previously applied for superintendency, only to be rejected because they lacked a doctorate degree, whereas a doctorate degree had not been required of other non-African American candidates for the position. All participants held academic degrees in Educational Administration, and most held high school principalships and central office positions, many dealing with human resources or finance.

Sub-Question 1. The first sub-question of the study asked, **"**What specific processes or strategies were employed by participants to gain their role as a superintendent in North

Carolina?" Responses included information about strength and integrity, expectations and challenges faced by African American superintendents.

Factors Based on Personal Strength and Integrity. Participants reported that mentors were a crucial component in their support systems, often acting as sounding boards, helping them to navigate new and often complex dilemmas in their leadership, and playing pivotal roles in their career development. Superintendent Jamie credited great principals as mentors who helped to develop her into a leader; in her teaching years, her principals always empowered her to learn everything--how to run the office, complete peer observations, even encouraged her participation on the school improvement team, and all of those experiences filtered into and informed her roles in administrative leadership.

Superintendent Eva credited having two male out-of-state superintendent mentors with providing the most advice and support for her superintendency. While emphasizing the impact of good mentors, Superintendent Eva recommended a very small and close-knit support system as the best strategy. Superintendent Cathy believed her mentors really nurtured her and played a pivotal role in her administration ascension; she spoke of the need for different mentors that each served a different purpose in her life. Superintendent Fran described her relationship with her mentor, a seasoned superintendent, as phenomenal, indicating that they have a scheduled call every Tuesday morning and a monthly in-person meeting to check in.

Participants highly ranked their faith, family and friends, having seasoned superintendents as trusted mentors and building a strong, trustworthy team within the district and community amongst the cornerstones of their support systems during their superintendency. Faith and prayer were consistently referenced topics, reiterated by each participant, but some participants mentioned relying heavily on their spirituality more frequently as an integral source

of support in their daily lives. Both, Superintendent Fran and Superintendent Gale referred to their spirituality as a strong support mechanism. Superintendent Dana thanked God for intelligence and guiding her in her career and life choices. Superintendent Cathy said:

> I always have and still do pray a lot. You just come to meditate in a different way day to day and so I just really have that strong faith. I know that I'm there for a reason, this is something I was meant to do, and it's something that I can do. (Cathy, personal interview, 2018)

Additional sources of support cited included reliance on technology and social media. Superintendent Amanda stressed the importance of leaning on technology for support: "I would also say that technology is definitely one of my supports because it helps me to maintain organization, to be able to share things and be able to communicate effectively with my district." Other participants highlighted the need to successfully integrate social media in order to effectively disseminate solid messaging throughout the district in a timely fashion.

Factors Based on Expectations. Gaining a variety of experience, obtaining a doctorate degree, as well as having mentors and a strong support team were important strategies employed by participants to secure their role as North Carolina superintendents (see Table 2). Of the 10 participants, one of them had been a lateral entry teacher, one had been a speech pathologist, and the other eight participants had pursued undergraduate degrees in education. Of all the participants, 90% held doctoral degrees, supporting the initial finding that doctorate degrees are generally viewed as a minimum requirement for African American women pursuing the superintendency. The one participant that reported not having a doctorate degree held her state superintendent certification at the time of hire and was completing her doctoral program during this study and indicated that gaining a variety of experiences and returning to her small district

was key to her advancement to the superintendency. Most all participants reported not even be considered for the role without a doctorate degree. Ninety percent indicated a traditional path of advancement, which consisted of chronologically matriculating through the roles of teacher, principal, associate superintendent, other district leadership, and finally, superintendency (see Table 1). Only one participant indicated a less traditional route; she had never been a principal, nor did she have experience in a classroom setting, but she credited mentors, key relationships within the district, and central office experience with securing her superintendency role in her hometown.

Factors Based on Challenges. Regularly interfacing with other superintendents, both seasoned and emerging, seemed a critical component for success in the superintendency. Establishing relationships with other superintendents to potentially use as a sounding board was a critical component of Superintendent Beth's success. She stated in her interview that "I've been blessed over time to have a support mechanism outside of the district that consists of retired superintendents who've done this work." She also related this sentiment in her letter to an aspiring superintendent when she said, "find that one person that will never let you give up on yourself." Superintendent Jamie cited her participation in the School Administrators' Association (SAA) as integral to her success; SAA provided her with a mentor and a cohort of superintendents to consult when she had questions.

Participants highlighted the importance of establishing your own support infrastructure once in office and stressed the learning curve of team building as a new superintendent, citing

the need to sometimes disassemble and reassemble teams that you can trust in order to maximize productivity and truly be efficient. Superintendent Beth stated:

> As a first-year superintendent, the support mechanisms are little too few. Little too few, and you sort of have to find your own, because you don't know who to trust . . . that took a moment to establish . . . I had to immediately learn who to trust with some work that needed to be done . . . and I had to make some switches and changes just based on some track records because there was work to be done. (Beth, personal interview, 2018)

Sub-Question 2. The second sub-question for this research study was, "How have the personal backgrounds of participants as African American women contributed to their experiences in superintendent positions in North Carolina?" Most answers were given in terms of personal strength and integrity, as well as personal challenges. Some superintendents expressed the need to change their expectations.

Factors Based on Personal Strength and Integrity. There are a variety of cultural influences and experiences that shape the personal identity of African American women pursuing the superintendency, including both internal and external factors. These factors include self-perception, but the forms of external perception are varied and radial: how their immediate environment views and interacts with their image; how the district and community at large perceive them; how they, in their immediate environment, are viewed within the framework of the surrounding community (see Table 2).

Viewing the participants as both African American and women in the larger framework of their extended community is imperative to considering the external factors of their personal identity. The culture of the state of North Carolina definitely comes to bear on the experiences of African American women pursuing the superintendency, as evidenced by the findings of this

study. "In the United States, hegemonic ideologies concerning race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation are often so pervasive that it is difficult to conceptualize alternatives to them, let alone ways of resisting the social practices that they justify" (Collins, 2000, p. 284). Looking at this dynamic locally, North Carolina is a red state, located not only in the south, but in the Bible Belt of the United States. As such, North Carolina has very traditional, conservative views of gender, and its location in the south indicates a very muddled, often historically virulent, approach to dynamics of race that includes slavery, the Confederacy and Jim Crow. Superintendent Fran voiced this dynamic, stating that, "knowing the landscape of North Carolina and the makeup--you know, that there is still some deep-rooted ways of thinking that have not caught up to the times."

Traditionally, many North Carolinians still perceive a hard delineation between male and female dominant professions, both sex and race remain elephants in the room, and extensive casual bias abounds. According to Superintendent Beth:

> I think in North Carolina there is still a mindset about who ought to lead districts, and I think it's subconscious. I don't know that it's intentional everywhere. I know it's intentional in some places, very intentional. But in other places, I think it's just the culture that this particular state, or I'll say states, are accustomed to. They don't always see certain people in certain roles, but I think we're doing a better job of making ourselves available, we're doing a better job... removing excuses and putting our own selves out there. (Beth, personal interview, 2018)

Many citizens in the state of North Carolina and the south are still resistant to the idea of women successfully navigating the superintendent office, a profession traditionally occupied by men. According to Superintendent Amanda, "Sometimes when people see women in a role like

this, they wonder well how did she get there because they never see that." Once in office, Superintendent Fran described the difficult balancing act between nurturer and go-getter that women superintendents must strike in their posturing and overall performance, an obstacle that men are spared.

> You have to balance between people seeing you as a nurturer versus if you're one of those superintendents who knows things need to be done and you're a go getter—that's viewed very differently than a male who behaves in the same way. So, you're always trying to balance. (Amanda, personal interview, 2018)

Superintendent Holly recommended that women develop tough skin, stating that although "a woman knows what it takes or what it will take to get the job done, people are always going to see the woman as not as strong as they would a man." This thinking is a substantial hurdle for women pursuing the superintendency, without even beginning to consider how gender bias is further compounded by race. The two are often nearly impossible to disentangle from each other. According to Superintendent Beth:

> People trust men in this role and Caucasian women more easily than they trust us as African American women. I don't know if it's because they think we're less smart, or if they think we've not done our homework. I don't know what excuse it is. (Beth, personal interview, 2018)

Such bias is not limited to community perception, but also permeates hiring processes, both internally, in terms of the candidates that decision-makers consider for hire, and externally, in terms of how selected candidates are regarded within the district and general public. Participants reported having experienced remnants of both sides of this bias and are often not

able to extricate race from various other biases, particularly sexism. Superintendent Fran described her experiences with the bias in hiring practices:

> If you look at the makeup of the school board, I don't know if African American women will always, even if they are the best suited for the position, have the opportunity extended to them, and when you do have the opportunity extended to you, the pay may not be the same. They may have been paying a male superintendent a certain amount but then they want to bring you in at something that's considerably lower. (Fran, personal interview, 2018)

Factors Based on Expectations. Superintendent Holly had experienced success in larger districts and brought a broader perspective and higher expectations to her superintendency in Happy City Schools, a small, rural district, however, her lack of experience in the county and district presented a very specific challenge when trying to enact change. Irrespective of her track record of positive results, her attempts to implement new programs within Happy City Schools met much community resistance. Communities are generally resistant to change, but Happy City Schools was so accustomed to doing things their specific way that they found it challenging to trust the instincts of an outsider superintendent and resisted even results-driven change.

> A lot of the times I feel like I am, or that we are bumping heads, and that they sometimes see me as this outsider coming in trying to change their world, and so even though the changes that we have implemented have been very successful and have benefited children and teachers...we have created some educational environments that are very different than they've had in the past. Sometimes we're bumping heads when we want to implement something new because they've not experienced it. They don't know what it's like to

> have successful schools, and so, those are a lot of the challenges. (Holly, personal interview, 2018)

Superintendent Gale emphasized the need to further develop her leadership and communication skills to accommodate and align the directives of her board.

> They are the boss and they can only act as the board, but there are seven of them...with seven, there comes seven personalities, seven initiatives. For me it's really stretched my leadership in how do I communicate with seven very different individuals and get them all to the same place. It's been a fun challenge but it's frustrating sometimes because I feel like sometimes it slows the work down more than I want to be slowed down. (Gale, personal interview, 2018)

Superintendent Ida cited significant Board challenges in her district, her board did not get along internally or externally. In addition to personal grievances with each other, they also did not get along with their county commissioners, creating substantial political hurdles for moving her work forward.

> Working with a contentious board in which important decisions took 3-5 hours to come to a vote . . . that was a major struggle. . . Another challenge would be that not only did my board not get along, but they didn't get along with county government, and because of that county government for several years had withheld appropriate funding for schools and other current expenses. So, I had to work with the board attorney and the board in suing the county government. So how do you have a working relationship with two boards that can't stand each other, and one board that can't stand themselves? (Ida, personal interview, 2018)

Factors Based on Challenges. Participants emphasized the crippling importance of timing when deciding to pursue the superintendency, highlighting the strenuous, all-encompassing demands of the office, particularly on those raising a family. Participants that were mothers decided to forego pursuing the superintendency while juggling the more intensive years of motherhood, citing the paramount importance of family rearing for women. Superintendent Jamie pointed out the resources allocated to superintendents with the expectation that they are readily reachable and available at all times, a potentially overwhelming demand, with or without a family.

> When you become a superintendent, you're going to give up a part of your life, you're going to give up a lot of your life, a part is probably not the right word, because you're on 24/7. You're never off. They provide you with access to a car or the usage of your own car by reimbursing, they provide you with a cell phone . . . (and) they expect when they call that you answer regardless of the time. They expect for the call to be returned immediately and if not why? So, coupling that with your regular existence on the earth is a lot. (Jamie, personal interview, 2018)

Though such demands can be disheartening, participants encouraged future superintendents to persevere and focus on identifying the right time. Superintendent Beth encouraged African American women seeking superintendency to not shy away from potential challenges and demands, but to stay the course and be more confident in their abilities to create the time, energy and space for their superintendency goals when the timing felt right. In doing so, she reminded aspiring African American women to take time for themselves in her letter to aspiring

superintendents. Nonetheless, for Superintendent Beth, raising her own family still meant waiting until her children were of college age to apply for superintendency.

> It is hard to run a family, to run a home, to run your own children, and to run a district? That's hard. That's why I had to wait . . . It wasn't until I got our daughter in college that I said "now it's a little more possible, it's a little more doable" . . . I had to wait until it was convenient for my family life, and that's hard for us women. But when it was time... I had to push the button and challenge my own self-- to put myself out there. (Beth, personal interview, 2018)

Superintendent Amanda encouraged women to pursue superintendency in spite of motherhood, viewing it as a marriage of sorts that required the same skill set used to manage a home and a family.

> I would encourage women just in general to push forward to doing these type of positions because I think sometimes we think we don't have the skill set or the strengths to be able to lead, but you lead a lot, especially if you are a mother in a household with a husband and children. You are constantly a leader there, and the same type of leadership skills that you have to apply and have in a working relationship with your husband and your children are the same things you want to apply as a superintendent. You're still making sure that people are ok, we're on the same page, we're still looking out for the best interests of our kids--it's just like a marriage to your district, that's what it is. (Amanda, personal interview, 2018)

In this study, only 20% of participants had grown up in the districts where they served as superintendents and cited their homegrown positioning as an asset; for instance, Superintendent Eva was the first superintendent not locally groomed in Elephant County Schools in 25 years.

Participants who were native to their districts described many benefits of their homegrown status, including an established rapport with the community and an understanding of the culture. Those that grew up in their districts felt uniquely positioned, stressing their familiarity with the political and cultural climate and generations of families within the community as critical sources of support, whereas those who did not have previous experience in the district (were not native to the county, did not receive their education in the district, or had not previously taught in the district) experienced challenges adjusting to local politics and culture.

Superintendent Dana, a native of Diamond County where she became superintendent, pointed out that "Diamond County has a different culture, and if you don't embrace that or understand it, you will not be successful . . . the guys that came from the outside, they didn't have that connection." Superintendent Amanda who attended Apple City Schools and is now their superintendent repeated that sentiment.

> That's where I get my strength and my support in just knowing that people understand the vision that we're trying to put out there, and they know we're trying to put these things in place to impact your kids' future--that's been most of my support. With some past superintendents I think they came in and were blindsided because sometimes when you're in a rural area, people here just function a little bit differently than other areas, and sometimes, it's due to lack of resources and lack of exposure. And when you bring a superintendent that really doesn't know the climate and the culture here . . . the people are sometimes a little more aggressive with their needs versus what they feel like you're willing to bring, (and) we really don't give those people a chance sometimes. So, I think

> that the biggest strength that I have in comparison to the other ones (superintendents) is that I'm actually from the community. (Amanda, personal interview, 2018)

Conversely, in addition to the challenges of race and gender bias, participants who were perceived as outsiders also experienced relational and performance obstacles. Superintendent Beth's experience was further compounded by race and gender:

> To this district, I'm an outsider, and that's not always looked upon very nice. But I have the nerve to be a girl on top of it, and an African American so, it's quite different from what this county is accustomed to. (Beth, personal interview, 2018)

Neither native to the county or homegrown within the district, Superintendent Fran met opposition when deciding to promote staff based on skill and performance rather than on tenure. Her decisions led to personnel confrontations and a rippling within the community among those that did not agree with or support her decisions, but she countered this by building strong community relationships, conducting "listening tours" and proactively interfacing with the community to foster parental support. Regarding the advantage of building trust within her new community, she said "when I have to make tough decisions later on in the work, they know me, and they can understand why, and they support me, and the same thing with the county commissioners." Ultimately, she overcame this obstacle and has grown to be known as "the community superintendent." In addition to proactively managing community relations, Superintendent Cathy suggested that outsider superintendents learn to communicate their vision in a way that the district understands while also honoring the history of the district.

> If you don't say it the right way in person, over the phone, or on paper, that's not a good thing. That's becoming a better experience because I'm learning how to communicate

> differently. I thought I was a good communicator, but I think in this district, there's just a different way that you have to do it. (Cathy, personal interview, 2018)

She went on to say:

> You have to really consider where you are, the history, and things that have gone on, and it's problematic to take that time to do all that...but that historical part, you have to consider it while you're trying to make some new decisions . . . and if you're that type of leader that just wants to create new, and you don't want to focus on that historical part, that can become a challenge. That communication and just trying to make sure you dig into those nuggets of history, that you consider those, because people are watching to see if you are going to change everything or are you going to be thoughtful, strategic, kind, and dedicated to the system to keep everything the way it was but then change it to make it new as well. (Cathy, personal interview, 2018)

Within their communities, participants cited the politics of working with the Board and county commissioners as a major challenge to their superintendent post. For most, their superintendency marked the first time in their careers that they experienced reporting to multiple bosses and the obstacles presented therein. They reported that politics of the Board often became more of an impediment, particularly if board members did not see eye to eye, or worse, did not get along with each other.

Superintendent Ida cited significant Board challenges in her district, her board did not get along internally or externally. In addition to personal grievances with each other, they also did

not get along with their county commissioners, creating substantial political hurdles for moving her work forward.

> Working with a contentious board in which important decisions took three to five hours to come to a vote . . . that was a major struggle . . . Another challenge would be that not only did my board not get along, but they didn't get along with county government, and because of that county government for several years had withheld appropriate funding for schools and other current expenses. So, I had to work with the board attorney and the board in suing the county government. So how do you have a working relationship with two boards that can't stand each other, and one board that can't stand themselves? (Ida, personal interview, 2018)

Sub-Question 3. The third sub-question for this study asked, "How do participants describe the impact of their personal identity in their experiences as a superintendent in North Carolina?" Interestingly, after performing open coding, and further organizing quotes based on personal strength and integrity, factors that seemed to indicate success for most superintendents were character traits such as perseverance and persistence. Personal drive and commitment were seen as an integral part of their journey to the superintendency.

Factors Based on Personal Strength and Integrity. For personal identity, or self-identification, participants were asked to identify three core words that best described themselves and their capabilities as superintendents. In the online focus groups, participants were not provided with a list of descriptors, but each responded with similar and overlapping self-descriptors. The most popular adjectives used were knowledgeable, data-driven, dedicated, and persistent (see Table 2); each were repeated by several participants. Other descriptors used were

closely associated, like smart/wise, determined/motivated, creative/resourceful, methodical/organized.

Concerning the few African American women that are chosen for superintendent positions in North Carolina, participants felt particularly proud of the accomplishment, but also described a very specific form of solitude that accompanied the position. Though some participants reported being preceded in their respective districts by an African American man in the role of superintendent, others referenced being the first African American, the first woman, and the first African American woman superintendent for their district. Superintendent Amanda gave an account of feeling like an outsider upon realizing that she would often be the only African American woman in a room of her peers and colleagues:

> In this role when you look around a lot at other people in this role, you're not going to see yourself and then if you're African American you even see yourself even less because when you look at the 115 superintendents when we're in a meeting, I'm just looking around and I'm like oh wow. (Amanda, personal interview, 2018)

Factors Based on Expectations. This solitude and "otherness" contributed to participants feeling as if they were living under a microscope, hyper visible and subject to intense scrutiny and critique; this feeling also permeated how participants perceived they were received throughout the district as well as the community. Superintendent Beth spoke of the mixed reception she encountered from both the district and local community as the first African American woman superintendent in Bear County Schools:

> When I first arrived all I heard was "we can't believe they hired an African American female--we can't believe they hired you--we can't believe . . . we have an African American female--we can't . . ." In some ways, that was very positive and in other ways,

> because of where we are in the history in this community, "we can't believe they hired an African American female." (Beth, personal interview, 2018)

Factors Based on Challenges. Superintendent Beth indicated that the community had a split reaction to her arrival, with some excitedly embracing her hire as a sure sign of progress, and others standing in disbelief and opposition that an African American woman could actually be fit for the job no matter her credentials.

Superintendent Amanda encouraged African American women to consider the impact that their presence and visibility in such high-ranking roles has on their students.

> I would encourage women to definitely not see applying to the superintendency as something that you can't do because you don't see a lot of female superintendents, and for African American women specifically, especially if you're in a predominantly African American district. Just think about the impact that you can have with those kids. If you match the demographics...why not help to lead those kids and guide those kids? You would impact other females that are also African American too in your district to see that oh yeah this could be me in the future. I always tell my kids if you see a man or woman that has done what you want to do, then you know that you can do that. The steps are already there. (Amanda, personal interview, 2018)

Similar to participants viewing other women superintendents as role models and sources of inspiration, African American women superintendents are also role models for their African

American students, particularly girls, providing inspiration and living proof that such high achievements are possible.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. These 10 interviews of African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina were conducted using a semi-structured interview method. Utilizing this method provided insight into the lived experiences of each of the participants in this study and led to an in-depth analysis of this unique phenomenon. The true essence of their experiences was captured from the spoken words of each participant.

All of the superintendent participants except one experienced a traditional journey to the superintendency, moving from teacher to principal to district administrator and finally to superintendent. Nine of the 10 superintendents have a doctoral degree. It is recognized among the superintendents that they have to have attained a doctorate to be taken seriously in their field. The superintendents also understand that having a doctorate is not always enough. They have to be knowledgeable and results oriented. Chapter Four revealed the findings of the data analysis conducted through coding and identifying emerging themes from the individual interviews, the online focus groups, and the letters to aspiring AA women superintendents. Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research allowed the analysis of the qualitative data associated with this study, and from this analysis, three major themes emerged to address the research questions guiding this study. The themes that emerged included factors based on personal strength and integrity, factors based on expectations, and factors based on challenges.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. The theoretical framework that guided this phenomenological study was Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000). This chapter presents a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, the implications, delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Since the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina, it was important to explore the perceptions of superintendents in North Carolina to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. A qualitative design was chosen to allow for an interactive and humanistic experience with the participants (Creswell, 2007). Data collected were able to answer a central question and three sub-questions. Data were collected from 10 participants. Through the process of coding and identifying themes, I was able to identify three themes concerning the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. The three themes that I identified from the findings are: factors based on personal strength and integrity, factors based on expectations, and factors based on challenges. A summary of each question follows with a description of the findings that help answer the research question.

The first research sub-question sought out processes or strategies employed by participants to gain their role as a superintendent in North Carolina. One process that participants identified was the importance of a strong relationship with God and a consistent

prayer life as cornerstones of their personal strength and progress through life; while all of the participants emphasized how impactful God was in their decision making, some stressed their reliance on their faith considerably more than others. Though not the case for all superintendents in North Carolina, a doctorate degree was reported as a minimum for African American women pursuing the superintendency in the state. With the exception of one participant, all participants in this study held a doctorate degree prior to being offered their superintendent roles, and the exception to this held the required state superintendent certification and was enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of her offer. Research on African American women superintendents reflects that academic outcomes are subtle at best, and that school boards care more for fiscal management and a balanced school budget than academic growth. Glass, Bjork and Brunner's (2000) analysis of the 10-year study of American school superintendents showed that most school boards claim to have an interest in the instructional program but see management of fiscal resources to be a critical component of the superintendency. This information has led the superintendent to seek more experience in fiscal matters.

The second research sub-question examined how the personal backgrounds of participants as African American women contributed to their experiences in superintendent positions. Some participants grew up in a family of educators while others simply reported their parents' expectation that they would pursue an education and do well, indicating that such expectations were set at an early age. Most participants appeared to have pursued a doctorate degree for personal reasons versus immediate professional gains, expressing a keen desire to be adequately prepared for the opportunity to pursue administrative leadership should it ever arise.

The third research sub-question asked participants to describe the impact of their personal identity in their experiences as a superintendent. Other sources of personal strength for

participants included reflection and learning from their lived experiences. Recollections of continually learning and reflecting upon both positive and negative experiences was evident in accounts given by each superintendent. Though each participant viewed traditional advancement as a strength in their role as superintendent, especially as it relates to improving academic outcomes for students, they also indicated that experience within human resources, community relations and district finance were key to their success in securing a superintendent position and navigating seamlessly once in office.

The central research question sought to synthesize the findings of the three research sub-questions. Personal strength and integrity emerged as a leading theme in participant responses. Higher expectations were the standard for the participants in this study, with each participant highlighting self-imposed expectations as well as having external standards set by family and community. Also, higher standards for preparation, including education and experience, were required of African American women in order to obtain the role of superintendent in North Carolina. Most participants appeared to have pursued a doctorate degree for personal reasons versus immediate professional gains, expressing a keen desire to be adequately prepared for the opportunity to pursue administrative leadership should it ever arise. All participants who held doctorate degrees believed that, as African American women, consideration for superintendency would not happen without the possession of a doctorate degree; though the job description reflected that a doctorate degree was only preferred, they felt that they would not have even been offered an interview without it. In their journey to the superintendency, participants discussed the many challenges they faced.

Participants emphasized the importance of an extensive variety of training and experience that encompasses a broader perspective of district operations and administration beyond

classroom curriculum and instruction, specifically referencing the importance of experience in human resources, community relations and budgeting. Glass et al. (2000) posited that women have fewer opportunities "to gain experience in finance, administration, and community relations, areas viewed by 80% of superintendents as essential to their success" (as cited in Kowalski, 2006, p. 320). Glass and colleagues further asserted that this lack of experience and training "in managerial skills is what most often dooms superintendents' tenures, regardless of their sex or race" (Gewertz, 2006, p. 2).

Discussion

This section of Chapter Five discusses the findings of the research study in relation to the empirical and theoretical review of the literature in Chapter Two. Although knowledge related to the unique experience of women is valuable, it is also valuable to gain insight and increase the body of knowledge that exist on minority women, such as African American women. This study can reveal the experiences of those who have been in the positon, therefore assisting those wanting to attain the position in the future. Empirical evidence in the literature review regarding the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina is linked to the findings of the study. The empirical foundation is followed by a discussion of the connection between the research study findings and the theoretical framework for this study, which is Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000). Empirical and theoretical implications are communicated along with delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Empirical

Few studies have been conducted on African American women superintendents (Angel et al., 2013; Christie, Jackson, & Babo, 2007; Pascopella, 2011). Research studies have been conducted on African American women in leadership (Bell & Chase, 1993; Jones &

Montenegro, 1983; Lomotey, 1993), but few have been conducted specifically on the role of African American women in the role of superintendent. Derrington and Sharratt (2009) conducted a study that found that even though the number of women accessing the superintendency has increased, the rate that they are rising to the superintendency position remains low. This research revealed that it was a trial for the participants to acquire the position of the superintendent and their experiences revealed three specific themes including factors based on personal strength and integrity, factors based on expectations, and factors based on challenges.

Factors based on personal strength and integrity. The current base of literature, as reviewed in Chapter Two, addresses the personal strength and integrity of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Since the African American female voice is largely absent from the literature, this study helped to fill that gap. According to the literature, African American women who have earned leadership positions in education have exhibited a strong will and tenacity while enduring racism and sexism (Bell & Chase, 1993; Jones & Montenegro, 1983; Lomotey, 1993). The participants of this research corroborated the literature. Each of the participants shared specific examples of the importance of their personal strength and integrity while experiencing some form of racism or sexism. Additionally, several participants went on to share that family members, friends, and professional and personal mentors were a source of strength for them. These support systems helped provide the strength the participants needed to acquire and maintain their positions. Having a sense of personal strength and determination, as well as integrity and a support system, were also noted in the literature as being factors that influenced leaders (Angel et al., 2013; Wiley, 2014), but the literature did not specifically attribute these factors to African American women in the role of a superintendent.

Factors based on expectations. From the current literature base, expectations are reviewed and expressed as both internal and external. Internal expectations were less dominate and defined in the literature, yet the participants of this study expressed a strong desire to acquire the role of the superintendent and were driven by internal expectations of themselves despite the challenges. According to the literature, African American women in leadership roles had many of the same responsibilities as school superintendents but worked under the direct supervision of the school district's white male superintendent (Angel et al., 2013). Since many of the participants were already performing the duties of a superintendent, many of them believed that they could achieve the role of superintendent and their expectation was that, despite the challenges, one day they would achieve that goal.

The participants also shared stories of external expectations placed on them by society to serve as role models and care givers, which they did not mind. However, the literature also noted that women in leadership roles have a limited voice due to the impact of societal expectations on them since many stereotypical norms defined by society of how women should behave have negatively influenced the rise of women to the role of the superintendent (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Glick & Fiske, 1999). The participants of this research revealed that the expectations of society for African American women had a negative impact on their ability to rise to the superintendency since many were expected to serve in a stereotypical role rather than a leadership role. Current literature noted that gender bias led to feelings of isolation for women in leadership roles (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). All of the participants expressed feeling a sense of gender-based bias which led them to feel isolated in their role at times. Due to the position of the African American women in the role of the superintendent, this research corroborated the literature. The participants acknowledged feeling an internal drive to achieve the role of the

superintendent while oftentimes feeling suppressed by societal expectations of them as African American women.

Factors based on challenges. The review of the literature revealed that African American women superintendents faced many challenges. This was no different for the participants of this study. Though education is a field largely populated by women, gender bias in the superintendency is a concern, and there is research to suggest that the challenges women encounter in the role of superintendent are different than those encountered by men (Björk & Keedy, 2001; Grogan, 2008; Mertz & McNeely, 1998; Sharp et al., 2000). One challenge is that, according to the literature, higher expectations are placed on women candidates than on men (Muñoz et al., 2014). This was shown to be true for the participants of this study. Kowalski (2011) noted that women hold only approximately 24% of all superintendent positions in the United States but, historically, in North Carolina, the percentage of women superintendents is less than 1%, which is far less than the national average. Additionally, though women dominate the field of education, little progress has been made to increase the numbers of African American women in educational administrative roles (Björk, 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Several participants expressed a concern for being held to a higher degree of scrutiny than their male counterparts, which was reiterated in the literature where it was noted than men tend to be promoted based on potential while women are promoted based on performance (Evans, 1998; Muñoz et al., 2014), and further, this study revealed that being held to a higher standard was also done in a more public forum than for their male counterparts making it a significant challenge for some participants.

Theoretical

In addition to having a relationship to the empirical literature, this study also demonstrated a theoretical relationship to the theory for this study, which was Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000). Howard-Hamilton (2003) stated that the theory was promising for understanding African American women and effectively addressing their needs. The following paragraphs address how this study extended and shed new light on theories informing the research topic and highlights specific ways this study extended the theory.

The theoretical framework provided a guide for better understanding the lived experiences of African American women superintendents, as Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) promotes seeing African American women as agents of knowledge towards understanding the interconnectedness of sexism, class oppression, and racism. The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. In identifying the lived experienced of African American superintendents in North Carolina, the theoretical analysis of the findings suggests a connection exists between the existing literature and the results of this study, yet new information was also revealed.

Black feminist thought clarifies and calls attention to the analysis of ideas and experiences specific to African American women (Collins, 2000). Data from this study were analyzed, and three themes developed that impacted the perspectives of the participants. These themes included factors based on personal strength and integrity, expectations, and challenges. Personal strength and integrity was a recurring theme throughout the research and was reiterated by all participants.

Collins (1990) developed the Black feminist theory to further the experiences and ideas shared by African American women and to provide a unique angle based on their experiences. He theory is comprised of six features. The sixth feature of Black feminist thought is its

relationship to other in terms of social justice (Collins, 2000). Having personal strength and integrity was noted as important to the participants, as all felt a sense of injustice and had a strong desire for equality. Collins (2000) noted that African American women are intellectuals and that Black feminist research is greater than any single individual. None of the participants felt that they were less-qualified for the job than another individual, which was why personal strength was such an important factor for them.

Related to Black feminist theory is the fact that in much of the literature, Black women were presented as having experienced gender-bias. Gender bias is defined as unequal treatment in employment opportunities and expectations due to gender (Gender Bias, n.d.), and research reveals that all women will experience gender bias at some point in their lives (Acker, 1990; Grogan, 2008; Jones-Mitchell, 1993). Researchers who study gender and the superintendency have highlighted the importance of differentiating gender issues in educational leadership (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010), yet all participants felt that gender played a role in the delay of their attainment of the position of superintendent. According to Black feminist theory, challenges for the participants of this study are two-fold. One challenge is that the participants are all women, and the other is that they are also African American. Additionally, two studies revealed that for women superintendent's gender and racial-bias promoted stress and isolation (Grogan, 2008; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). All participants in this study revealed feeling stressed, and several felt isolated. However, those that surrounded themselves with a strong support system of friends, family, and colleagues did not express feelings of isolation.

Implications

The implications of this research stem from the central research question: How do African American women describe their lived experiences in superintendent positions in the state

of North Carolina? This research may affect future African American women superintendents in North Carolina. In addition, mentors to African American women superintendents and professors in superintendent programs may gain knowledge from this study.

Theoretical

Black Feminist Thought emerged to address the uniqueness of the feminist movement through the experiences of African American women. Emphasis was placed on the experiences of African American women as opposed to the frames of knowledge that exist based on the experiences of White men and women. Black Feminist Thought aimed to provide knowledge through this study as a change agent to educational institutions that will ultimately promote social change.

Empirical

Future African American women superintendents are offered a number of preparation steps based on the review of the literature and the results of this study. Preparation, including positioning oneself into learning situations and the acquisition of a doctorate degree, are recommended by the study. Other preparation suggestions encourage women to build strong support systems and retain a mentor. The literature and participants in this study expressed the importance of preparation by participating in experiences that will provide exposure to the superintendency.

Mentors to future African American women superintendents may also gain knowledge from this study. Strong mentors were not only expressed as being necessary for the acquisition of the position of superintendent, but they are also necessary while serving in that position. Participants noted how they had weekly meetings with their mentors and that mentors were

always available to them; this was very helpful to them in their positions. Mentors may learn new things to offer and to do to support African American women superintendents.

Practical

Professors in superintendent programs may gain knowledge from this study to better help and teach future African American women superintendents. It is important that superintendent preparation programs adequately prepare future leaders for the superintendency (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Students should be given real-life scenarios and examples, so they can learn about decision making. Some of these examples should come from African American women superintendents and their experiences. This is another area where mentoring is important. Some people may not have mentors already. Preparation programs should be prepared not only to recruit more African American women students, but also African American women who can serve as mentors to their students.

Implications for future African American women superintendents. The licensure competencies that serve as professional standards for the superintendency are where aspiring African American women superintendents should start. These licensure standards can serve as a guide to understanding superintendents' daily regimens in the operation of their districts. The standards may also show the women how to approach problem solving. African American women superintendents usually have great expertise and experience in academics. Having someone who takes the lead for the managerial role allows the superintendent to focus on other areas of the district. It should be clear that the superintendent, as the sole employee of the board, is the one that ultimately is responsible for every aspect of the district. The superintendent must have a clear accountability system that gives her confidence that the managerial work is being done with integrity and excellence.

Implications for mentors. Establishing a strong mentor program for African American women superintendents is essential to the development of superintendents. Having a mentor is key to the success of African American women superintendents, but having a special sisterhood goes beyond policy to practice. One idea is for programs to provide carefully selected mentors who may influence more women to enter the superintendency. The mentors can design learning opportunities that might influence more women to consider the superintendency.

Implications for professors in superintendent programs. Currently traditional superintendent programs are designed to follow the experience and perspective of white men and generally do not take into account the experiences of diverse populations. This study showed the urgency needed for programs to provide an internship and a mentor, understand the need to attract a diverse group of individuals and to provide an in-depth study of the superintendency. It is also important that programs provide a network of other superintendents in order for African American women superintendents to be successful.

Delimitations & Limitations

The primary delimitation of this study was that the participants were limited to African American women in North Carolina who were serving as school superintendents. With the specific focus of excavating the experiences of African American women superintendents, the experiences of other minority superintendents (including non-African American women and African American men) across the nation were purposefully excluded. As an aspiring superintendent in North Carolina, I am interested in the experiences of African American women superintendents in my state, a state with historical racial and gender bias issues.

One limitation of this study must be considered. Due to the small population of African American women who have experience within superintendent roles in North Carolina, the

minimum sample size of participants was a limitation. Additionally, the restricted geographical region was limitation. Despite the limiting sample size and confined geographic region, the findings provided insight into participants' lived experiences of ascending to superintendent roles in North Carolina public school districts. If African American men had been included in the participate population, I believe their experiences would have differed from those of a woman and would not have made contributions to make the study stronger or allow the idea of double conscious to play a role. However, if the study had been open to African American women participants in surrounding states, I believe the data would have been richer as there would have been more potential participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study revealed more information about the experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina, there is still work to be done. In their pursuit of the superintendency, African American women have endured racism and sexism (Bell & Chase, 1993). Though some gains have been made, they are rare in regard to race and ethnicity (Christie, Jackson, & Babo, 2008). Bridging the gap and improving the experiences of African American women superintendents will require more exploratory research. Are there missing leadership opportunities that will help them prepare for the superintendency? Do those who train future superintendents need cultural competency training in order to better prepare and groom those of different sexes and cultures? Further research should be conducted in various designs to better understand the experiences of African American women superintendents. I think completing a case study would be very revealing in North Carolina because there are not an abundance of potential participants. Suggestions for future study include:

- Repeat the research study with additional African American women superintendents with experience in diverse settings. The majority of the participants in this study held superintendent roles in rural areas.
- Repeat the research study with additional African American women superintendents who work in other states. This study was limited to the state of North Carolina.
- Expand the research study to African American women in other district leadership positions.
- Expand the research study to other minority women in the superintendent roles.
- Quantitative data collection methods are recommended to yield a larger pool of participants.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American (AA) women superintendents in North Carolina. The theoretical framework that guided this phenomenological study was Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000). This chapter presents a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, the implications, delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research.

In conclusion, there are current and urgent challenges facing African American women aspiring to be a school superintendent. White men continue to maintain a key presence in the chief executive position in school districts across the nation. Given the increased diversity in public schools (Snyder & Dillow, 2013), it is becoming more important to hear the voices of minorities serving in district leadership roles, specifically African American women. It is critical that African American women are provided the opportunities and necessary support for successful ascension to the superintendency.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 13, 2018

Latoia Valentine
IRB Approval 3170.031318: A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of African American Women Superintendents in North Carolina

Dear Latoia Valentine,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

[redacted]
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX B: Participant Email

Participant Email

Invitation to Participate in a Doctoral Study

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH of AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS

February 8, 2018

Dear Superintendent,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the experiences of African-American women in North Carolina who, in spite of their underrepresentation in the superintendency, have been able to serve as superintendent. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are an African-American woman and a certified superintendent with at least one year of experience in the North Carolina superintendency, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview, an online focus group, and to compose a letter to an aspiring African-American woman superintendent. It should take approximately 3 hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate click on the link provided (Informed Consent) and complete and return the consent document to the researcher at lvalentine5@liberty.edu and contact me 336.583.9900 or email me to schedule an interview. A consent document is provided as the first page you will see after you click on the link the consent document contains additional information about my research, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview or email it back to me.

Sincerely,

Latoia A. Valentine

Doctoral Student, Liberty University

APPENDIX C: Consent Form

Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA
Latoia A. Valentine, Principal Investigator
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study to describe the experiences of African-American women superintendents in North Carolina. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently an African American woman superintendent in North Carolina or have been one in the past 5 years. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Latoia A. Valentine a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of African-American women superintendents in North Carolina. The research seeks answers to the following questions:
Central Question: How do African-American women describe their lived experiences in superintendent positions in the state of North Carolina?
Sub-Question 1. What specific processes or strategies were employed by participants to gain their role as a superintendent in North Carolina?
Sub-Question 2. How have the personal backgrounds of participants as black women contributed to their experiences in superintendent positions in North Carolina?

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an interview with the researcher, lasting one-hour. This interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon neutral location. Additionally, the interview will be audio recorded.
2. Participate in an online focus group with other participants. The online focus group will be conducted using the online format Google Classroom (class code: jtmzc6s).
3. Write a Letter to an Aspiring African-American Woman Superintendent. This will serve as a "Things I wish I had known" letter; participants will write letters of advice to other African-American women in educational leadership who are aspiring for the superintendency.
4. Participate in member-checking, where you will be asked to verify all findings and conclusions made from individual interview and discussions were accurate.

Risks: There are no known risks associated with this study aside from risks encountered in daily living.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include helping to understand experiences of current and past African American women superintendents and help future African American women superintendents based on their unique experiences and insights.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Writing prompts, recordings, and related transcripts will be stored securely in password protected data files. In addition, the researcher will be the only individual to have access to data and information will only be used for purposes of this study. If other purposes are desired, additional consent will be retrieved from participant. Furthermore, pseudonyms will be given to participants and used in all written and electronic records to protect identity. However, due to the nature of the focus groups, identity security and information confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Data will be destroyed following the three-year federal regulation mark from the password protected computer. Data will be dragged to the recycle bin and then permanently deleted. Any paper data sources existing will be shredded.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Latoia A. Valentine. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 336.583.9900 or lvalentine5@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Bunnie Claxton at blclaxton@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant Date

_____

Signature of Investigator Date

APPENDIX D: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What kind of student were you in K-12 and in higher education?
3. What led you to the superintendency?
4. Describe the type of school district you manage.
5. How and why are you different from previous superintendents in that district?
6. What most prepared you for the superintendency, including previous roles and experiences?
7. Once you became superintendent, describe how you transformed as an educational leader.
8. Describe your support mechanisms.
9. What strengths or assets do you bring to the superintendency?
10. What challenges have you experienced as a superintendent?
11. What was your best experience as a superintendent?
12. Based on your experiences, what advice would you offer women who aspire to the superintendency in North Carolina, and how would the advice differ it was directed towards an African-American woman?
13. Why do you think there are so few black women in the position of superintendent in North Carolina?
14. How do you think your experiences as an African American woman superintendent is/was different from men and White women in North Carolina?

APPENDIX E: Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

1. What strengths or assets do you bring to the superintendency related to being a woman and an African American?

2. What challenges or constraints have you experienced as a superintendent related to be a woman and an African American?

3. Identify a situation that was particularly challenging for you as a superintendent. Do you think that being woman influenced how you responded? Do you think being African American influenced how you responded?

4. What motivates you to remain in the superintendent's position?

5. What three words would you use to describe who you are as a superintendent?

6. Please share with me any additional information you think would be beneficial to my research.