A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY EXAMINING THE SUCCESS AND PERSISTENCE OF

AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS

by

Kimberly Dixon Ferguson

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

Sharon Michael-Chadwell, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Kristy Motte, Ed.D., Committee Member

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The theories guiding this study were Delgado's critical race theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as they address the plights faced by African American women, specifically racism, sexism, classism, loneliness, microaggressions, marginality syndrome, and the status of outsider. The central question guiding this study was: How do African American female superintendents describe their success and perseverance achieving the school superintendent position? The subquestions for this study were designed to explore in deeper detail how African American female superintendents describe their path to success in achieving superintendence and how they describe the experiences and strategies that contributed to their perseverance in superintendence. Data collection included individual interviews with 11 past and present superintendents of school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia, a focus group interview with five participants, and participants' documents and personal artifacts. Data analysis involved organizing and coding the data to reflect the research subquestion areas of success and perseverance, to produce two major themes: desire to succeed and determination to continue. Findings included study participants' descriptions of their experiences as challenging with gender and race presenting obstacles to their leadership progression, but they viewed their impact on others as a significant motivator to persist. Additionally, all agreed success is achievable when there are supportive professional and personal networks in place to undergird their efforts to lead.

Keywords: leadership, motivation, persistence, social support

Copyright Page

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful daughter, Melanie, a huge source of motivation for me to see this journey to its completion. It is my prayer that she will learn from the examples of leadership, resilience, and persistence displayed by the phenomenal women included in this study and know that no achievement is beyond her reach.

Acknowledgments

First, I thank my Lord and Savior for everything that I have and all that I, and for getting me to this point to complete this dissertation. It was faith and dependence on Him that makes all things possible. I thank Dr. Sharon Michael-Chadwell and Dr. Kenneth Tierce for the guidance and support provided throughout this educational journey. I thank my parents for their belief in me and my ability to achieve my goals. I thank my husband Herb, who gave me the time, space, love, patience, and support to make it over the finish line, and keeping our daughter Melanie entertained while Mommy worked. I thank my daughter Melanie for her laughter that gave me renewed focus when I was tired and her wonderful hugs that gave me energy and joy when I was tired. Finally, I thank my friend, DeShonna, for constantly challenging me to push through, consistently reminding me why I started this journey when I needed it. Thank you all for the continued encouragement all along the way.

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American Association of School Administrators (AASA)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Strong Black Woman (SBW)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In the realm of elementary and secondary education, the superintendent is the highest-ranking leader within the school system (McCabe, 1992). Tradition has shown that for many school systems, the superintendent position has a long history of being filled by Caucasian, male candidates (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Only in recent years have women been successful in acquiring the superintendent post (Alston, 2005). Female African American superintendents represent a unique group whose quest of this post has been particularly difficult; African American female superintendents face the distinct challenge of being doubly marginalized in society because of both their gender and race (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Cryss Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999). Despite these obstacles, African American females continue to persistently pursue superintendency, and many continue to successfully acquire this post (Jackson, 1999).

This multiple case study was conducted to identify factors contributing to African American women becoming successful in acquiring the position of superintendent for elementary and secondary schools. Chapter One includes information pertaining to the background of the study, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study. In addition, Chapter One contains information related to the significance and nature of the study, the research questions, definition of pertinent terms, and assumptions.

Background

Since the early 1980s researchers have questioned the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in public education, due specifically to the disproportionate number of males to females in teaching as opposed to the superintendency (Babo et al., 2008). Gender stereotypes

have hampered the acension of women to the superintendency due to prejudice in the decision-making process for selecting elite leaders when male leaders search for individuals similar to themsleves as their replacement, thereby placing women at a disadvantage (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Hoyt, 2007).

According to the 1990 U.S. census data and the 1996 U.S. Department of Education report, females represent 51% of the population, as well as 51% of the schoolchildren in the United States (Alston, 2005). Women comprise approximately 65% of the nation's teachers, 43% of the nation's principals, but only 13.2% of the nation's superintendents (Gewertz, 2006). Educational leadership data indicate the nation's 15,000 district superintendents are overwhelmingly Caucasian and male (Allred et al., 2017; Gewertz, 2006). Data from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA, 2000) show that in 2000, 15% of superintendents were women and 5% were members of racial or ethnic minorities of either sex. More specifically, less than 3% of superintendents are African American women (Sebastian, 2018).

African American female superintendents face the distinct challenge of being doubly marginalized in society as a consequence of both their gender and race (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Cryss Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999). Despite these obstacles, African American females continue to persistently pursue superintendency and, while the numbers may be unsteady, many continue to successfully acquire this post (Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017; Jackson, 1999).

The lack of representation of African American women in the superintendence is a question many researchers struggle to answer to this day (Babo et al., 2008; Brown, 2014; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Almost 60 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*

(1954) decision, the invisible "glass ceiling" remains, manifesting as a perpetual struggle for African American women to gain equal access and equal opportunity to positions of leadership in education (Babo et al., 2008). African American feminists have argued that unlike their Caucasian counterparts, African American women are met with discrimination and inequalities associated with race, class, and gender—a three-fold burden to overcome (Babo et al., 2008; Gresham & Sampson, 2019).

Historical Context

To understand why the experiences of African American women are different from those of Caucasian women as well as those of African American men, one must consider the historical progression and ideology of African American people in the United States (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). A historical review of educational leadership positions indicates women held office similar to that of the superintendent as long ago as the early 20th century (Alston, 2005). In 1910, women comprised 8.9% of all superintendents, and by 1930, the number increased to 10.9% (Alston, 2005). Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of the historic Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and corresponding desegregation of schools, was the loss of leadership positions for African American administrators (Alston, 2005). At the time of the Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, there were more than 82,000 African American educators in United States schools (Alston, 2005; Toppo, 2004). In the years that followed, more than 38,000 African American teachers and administrators lost their positions, and by the 1970s, the percentage of female superintendents fell to 1.3% (Alston, 2005; Toppo, 2004).

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of female superintendents (AASA, 2020). By 1990, the percentage of female superintendents in the United States had risen

to 6.6%; and by the year 2000, the percentage nearly doubled to 13.2% (Cryss Brunner, 1999; Glass et al., 2000); however, the vast majority of superintendents (87%) were male. Currently, the majority of superintendents are male, as there are nearly 15,000 superintendents nationally and approximately 2,000 are female (AASA, 2020).

Social Context

Having proper role models is important for all aspiring educational administrators. Because Caucasian men dominate educational administration positions, most of the coursework in administrative preparatory programs reflects the Caucasian male perspective, which is not a perspective that resonates with African American women (Calderone et al., 2020; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Lemasters & Roach, 2012). However, the scarcity of African American female superintendents diminishes their ability to serve as role models or be included in support systems, and this unavailability of role models and support systems has the negative effect of perpetuating an already unjust situation (Calderone et al., 2020; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). As a group, African American females constitute a minority among senior level education administrators (Gewertz, 2006). More specifically, African American females are severely underrepresented in the population of superintendents, which is a phenomenon that has persisted over time (Blount, 1998; Brown, 2014: Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Cryss Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999). Only a small number of African American females have succeeded in breaking from the norm and have been successful in achieving this senior post (AASA, 2020).

In addition, because the population of African American female superintendents is small, in many respects these women are somewhat invisible within the superintendency ranks (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). African American female superintendents' scarcity in the

nation's school districts may make their practices and achievements in this role invisible to other African American females who aspire to this position (Calderone et al., 2020; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). As Carroll (1982) stated, African American women are very isolated and do not have the same decision-making authority as Caucasian males in academic settings. African American women must define themselves without the benefit of prior model or precedent, and their survival and success are contingent on their ability to find a place to describe their experiences among persons like themselves (Carroll, 1982).

As school populations continue to become more diverse, it is imperative that school systems' senior leadership positions be more reflective of the populations served. Recent U. S. Census data indicate growth in Latino or Hispanic, Asian American, and Black populations by rates of 20%, 29%, and 8.5%, respectively and project minority Caucasian by the year 2045 (Frey, 2020). In response these changing demographics, minority teachers, administrators, and students alike can all benefit from the positive example of achievement illustrated by a successful African American female superintendent (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Likewise, the presence of an African American female superintendent that excels in her position can serve as an image to inspire other young women to aspire to this post as well (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000).

Theoretical Context

Applying the appropriate theoretical context for African America women can be challenging because many theories are very general and do not consider multiple identities and roles (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Critical race theory (CRT) was generated by scholars of color to prompt discourse about racial subjugation in society (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002). Research by these scholars promotes the idea that individuals in power designed laws and policies that were

supposed to be race-neutral, but still perpetuated racial and ethnic oppression. The CRT framework underscores the importance of viewing policies in their proper historical and cultural context in order to understand and deconstruct their racialized connotations (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002). According to critical race theorists, social constructs such as color blindness and meritocracy that are supposed to provide help and support to rectify wrongs, instead systematically disadvantage people of color and further advantage Caucasian people. Avoiding the issue of race allows individuals to acknowledge only extremely egregious racial maltreatments while other types of covert racial atrocities are avoided, neglected, and excused (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Lev Vygotsky (1978) suggested that human development results from a dynamic interaction between individuals and society. Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory suggests that development depends on interaction with people and the tools that the culture provides to help form their own view of the world. Sociocultural learning theory emphasizes the dynamic nature of this interaction and stress the idea that society does not just impact people; people also impact their society (Gallagher, 1999). According to Vygotsky (Gallagher, 1999), there are three ways a cultural tool can be passed from one individual to another. The first one is imitative learning, in which one person tries to copy the behaviors of another. The second way is by instructed learning which involves remembering the instructions of the teacher and then using these instructions to self-regulate their actions. The final way these tools are passed to others is through collaborative learning, which involves a group of peers who strive to understand each other and work together to learn a specific skill (Gallagher, 1999).

Critical race and sociocultural learning theories address the plights faced by African American women, specifically racism, sexism, classism, loneliness, microaggressions,

marginality syndrome, and the status of outsider within (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Despite challenges, African American women continue to advance in leadership roles in educational leadership. However, the tenacity and resilience of the African American women who do meet the challenges of ascending to the superintendency and are successful has not been studied extensively.

Situation to Self

I am an African American female aspiring to one day achieve a high-ranking position in education administration. In the fall of 2020, I began teaching secondary education at a Virginia high school. I believe my role as an educator is to encourage students to believe in themselves and their ability to achieve. My philosophy of education is that an individual's worldview is shaped by their beliefs; what we believe—about ourselves and others—determines how we relate to and manage the world around us. My life philosophy is based on a quote often attributed to Mahatma Ghandi: "Be the change you wish to see in the world." I desire to obtain a high-ranking position in education administration so I may advocate for and facilitate services that support all students' growth and development. I particularly want to advocate for young African American female students who may not see themselves reflected in leadership roles in educational settings.

By completing a qualitative case study to understand the factors supporting African American females' ascension into the role of superintendent, I will have a better understanding of the leadership development experiences, practices, and traits that contribute to the success of African American women as they become school superintendents. The information collected in this study will add to the limited body of knowledge presently available describing the experiences of African American female superintendents and inform my journey as an African

American female educator. Opportunities will be available to speak with several of the participants during educational leadership conferences for women in education.

  Qualitative research may be informed by paradigms that include post positivist, constructivist, participatory, or pragmatist (Creswell, 2007). The postpositivist paradigm follows the scientific method of investigation and views inquiry as a logical sequence of steps used to establish a universal theory to account social behavior (Creswell, 2007). The postpositivist paradigm is based on the belief that theory can be used to predict and control outcomes (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Post positivism relies on observation and data collection to explain human behavior and require the researcher to remain distanced to ensure findings are based on data and are not influenced by the personal preferences, beliefs, and values of the researcher (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In contrast, the pragmatic paradigm focuses on the study of a specific phenomenon and the actual behavior of participants and advocates for the researcher to take a relational approach to determining the importance aspects of the study (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In the constructivist paradigm, participants seek to make (or construct) meaning of the world in which they live and work, and the researcher relies heavily on the participants' views of the situation (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The meanings may have social and historical significance based on the lives of the participants, as well as the contexts in which the participants work and live. Similarly, in the participatory paradigm, the researcher seeks to make meaning and initiate change in the lives of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Utilizing a constructivist paradigm, I described the experiences of the African American female superintendents in the study to understand how they were able to persevere and successfully become superintendents in response to oppression, marginalization, alienation, and suppression experienced during their progression.

Philosophical assumptions provide direction for the study based on the researcher's view of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The assumptions can be ontological, axiological, or epistemological depending on the nature of the issue or focus of the study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2018). Ontological assumptions are rooted in the nature of reality and, more specifically, the subjective realities experienced by the participants in the study, and include the themes drawn from the words and evidence provided by the study participants (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ontological assumptions were appropriate guides as I examined the multiple, varying realities and experiences of the African American female superintendents to better understand the factors contributing to their persistence to the superintendence.

There were two ontological assumptions, rooted in constructivism and participatory worldviews, associated with this study of the persistence of African American female superintendents. The first assumption was that the challenges faced by African American females in their quest to become a superintendent differ from those experienced by individuals that are male or may be members of a different racial or ethnic group. African American females are severely underrepresented in the population of superintendents; a phenomenon that has persisted over time (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Cryss Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999). Only a small number of African American females have succeeded in breaking from the norm and have been successful in achieving this senior post (AASA, 2020). It is possible that the unique challenges faced by African American females may be a contributing factor that can provide explanation for the low numbers of these women that ultimately succeed in these positions.

The second assumption was that the coping mechanisms used by African American female superintendents differ from those utilized by superintendents of other gender or racial and ethnic groups. Despite the small numbers of African American female superintendents, those women who are successful in reaching this post and serving as public school superintendents continue to meet the challenges of educational leadership and flourish in their jobs (Alston, 2005). Therefore, in this study, it was assumed that the coping mechanisms utilized by African American females to deal with the challenges faced may serve as contributing factors to their success in areas where many of their peers may not have succeeded.

The axiological assumption addresses the role of values and acknowledges the extent the researcher's values and biases are present in the context of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am an African American female aspiring to one day achieve a high-ranking position in education administration. In my role as an educator, I have had the opportunity to support and mentor African American students, and I have also formed mentoring and sponsorship relationships with African American women in my school district. As an African American woman, I understand and appreciate the experiences of other African American women that choose to persist to obtain senior educational leadership positions despite the obstacles encountered. In describing the experiences of the African American female superintendents that participated in this study, I am able to reflect on my own reasons for entering and persisting in the education profession, which is to advocate for African American females like myself that do not see themselves reflected in educational leadership positions. The results of this study, describing the experiences of African American women that have been successful in reaching the superintendent position, can serve as inspiration and motivation for other African American women to persist as well.

The epistemological assumption addresses what constitutes knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By having the participants tell their own stories, this study gave voice to the idea that evidence is assembled based on the individual views of the participants, as the researcher relies on quotes and spends time with the participants to provide context for understanding what is being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant discussed her individual journey to superintendence and these experiences are integrated into the results of the study. Because I hold a social constructivist view of research and believe individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell & Poth, 2018), in this study knowledge was constructed using the words of the participants. While I attempted to become close to the participants and document the reality of their experiences, I utilized bracketing to ensure that the voices of the participants retained precedence and were separated from my own. Direct quotes from the participants were also utilized to support the evidence provided by the participants.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this qualitative multiple case study was the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. More specifically, African American females are severely underrepresented in the population of superintendents, a phenomenon that has persisted over time (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Cryss Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999). Only a small number of African American females have succeeded in breaking from the norm and have been successful in achieving this senior post (AASA, 2020; Brown, 2014). Despite the small numbers of African American female superintendents, the women who are

successful in reaching this post and serve as public school superintendents continue to meet the challenges of educational leadership and flourish in their jobs (Alston, 2005). As school populations continue to become more diverse, it is imperative that school systems' senior leadership positions be more reflective of the populations served. Minority teachers, administrators, and students alike can all benefit from the positive example of achievement illustrated by a successful African American female superintendent.

However, the tenacity and resilience of the African American women who do meet the challenges of ascending to the superintendency and are successful have not been studied extensively. As the Commonwealth of Virginia has demonstrated a sharp increase in the overall number of female superintendents and the number of African American female superintendents, it is appropriate that Virginia school districts served as sites for this study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Throughout this study, a superintendent was generally defined as the chief executive officer of a school district employed by a board of education to be a political, educational, and managerial leader working to improve education (Johnson, 1996; Konnert & Augenstein, 1995). Using a multiple case study research design, the participants will be able to share personal and professional experiences as a means to describe the beliefs, behaviors, and support systems that enabled these African American females to persevere and succeed in achieving the position of school superintendent.

The theories guiding this study were the CRT and sociocultural theory addressing the needs of African American women in education. The CRT is a theoretical framework generated

by scholars of color to begin discourse about racial subjugation in society (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002). Villalpando and Bernal (2002) asserted that persons in power designed laws and policies that were supposed to be race-neutral, but still perpetuated racial and ethnic oppression. The CRT framework emphasizes the significance of using the appropriate historical and cultural context when considering policies and policy making as a means to analyze their racialized content (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002). Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory suggests development depends on interaction with people and the tools that the culture provides to help form their own view of the world (Gallagher, 1999). Sociocultural learning theory emphasizes the dynamic nature of this interaction and stress the idea that society does not just impact people; people also impact their society according to Gallagher. Critical race and sociocultural learning theories address the plights faced by African American women, specifically racism, sexism, classism, loneliness, microaggressions, marginality syndrome, and the status of outsider within (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). In the face of these challenges, African American women continue to advance in leadership roles in educational leadership.

Significance of the Study

As a group, African American females constitute a minority among senior level education administrators (Gewertz, 2006; Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017). African American females are severely underrepresented in the population of superintendents, and their underrepresentation has persisted over time (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Cryss Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999). There are approximately 15,000 superintendents serving in the United States and 26.7% are women (AASA, 2020). However, only 5% of superintendents nationwide are women of color (Sebastian, 2018). In Virginia, there are 133 division superintendents, of whom 45 are female. Of the 45 female superintendents in

Virginia, 18 are women of color (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2021). In 1985, almost 25 years ago, there was only one African American female superintendent (Revere, 1987).

Many school districts across the country are seeking trained, competent leaders to head their school systems (Fenwick, 2000). Unfortunately, high turnover rates, low job appeal and fewer candidates characterize the modern superintendence (Fenwick, 2000; Marshall et al., 2014). The AASA (2000) reported that typically, at any time, interim superintendents hold 15% of superintendent positions. To compound the shortage problem, scholars estimate that 80% of superintendents are nearing retirement age (Kowalski et al., 2011; Krantz, 2000). With concerns for future leadership of the nation's school system, the question arises, why are there not more women entering the ranks of the superintendence?

The information collected in this study adds to the limited body of knowledge that describes the experiences of African American female superintendents. The information gleaned from the descriptions of the participants' journeys helps to bring understanding to the conditions African American females face in their leadership pursuits and will provide guidance for other African American females that desire to complete a similar endeavor.

Research Questions

This multiple case study was guided by the following central research question (CRQ) and two research subquestions (SQs).

Central Research Question

How do African American female superintendents describe their experiences in pursuit of achieving the school superintendent position?

The amount of research completed on African American female superintendents nationwide is very limited. It has only been within the last 20 years that female superintendents and minority female superintendents have become a focus of scholarship and research (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Cryss Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999). Having a better understanding of the leadership development experiences, practices, and traits that contribute to the success of African American female school superintendents can be helpful in extrapolating themes that can be applied for future discussion, and perhaps be of aid to help African American females that aspire to superintendence be equipped with tools that will help them succeed.

Research Subquestions

SQ1:   How do African American female superintendents describe their path to success in achieving superintendence?

The position of school superintendent requires a leader who is able to motivate and engage the many members of their school district (Alston, 2005). In this role, the individual is responsible for managing complex organizations and often must make difficult decisions, all while under the watchful eye of the community stakeholders and constituents. The superintendency presents a number of challenges; despite the stress, many African American females are able to succeed and even thrive in this environment, often serving in large urban communities with hundreds of constituents (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Robinson et al., 2017). The purpose of this question is to have participants describe how they were successful in assuming the superintendent position.

SQ2:   How do African American female superintendents describe the strategies and experiences contributing to their perseverance in superintendence?

The traditional educational administration curriculum skews toward the perspectives of Caucasian men due to their dominance in educational administration programs (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Role models and representations of women of color in the senior ranks of educational administration are difficult to find, as the environment and culture is not one that is open, collaborative, and supportive to their perspectives and needs (Calderone et al., 2020; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Despite these obstacles, several African American female superintendents have succeeded in persisting in their position and providing leadership in their district. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Definitions

1. *African American*: African American refers to an American of African and especially of Black African descent, or a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. In acknowledgement of past and present studies, the terms *Black* and *African American* may be used interchangeably throughout this study to refer to individuals of African descent that reside in the United States (U. S. Census Bureau, 2020).

2. *Critical Race Theory (CRT)*: The CRT is a theoretical framework generated by scholars of color to address racial subjugation in society (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002).

3. *Leadership style*: Leadership style refers to the various patterns of behavior used when directing others (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

4. *Persistence*: In the context of this study, persistence refers to an individual's ability to continue to insistently endure in the face of opposition; their refusal to give up when confronted by obstacles (Feather, 1962).

5. *School district*: The school district is the geographic area within a state organized for the purpose of supporting and directing public education and headed by a superintendent of schools (McCabe, 1992).

6. *Social support*: Social support refers to the existence or availability of people on whom one can rely; people who openly communicate care, value, and love toward another (Basham et al., 1983).

7. *Sociocultural learning theory*: Sociocultural learning theory suggests human development occurs from interaction between individuals and society, wherein the people and the culture of the society help the individual form their own view of the world (Vygotsky, 1978)

8. *Superintendent*: The superintendent is the chief executive officer of a school district employed by a board of education to be political, educational, and managerial leaders working to improve education (Johnson, 1996; Konnert & Augenstein, 1995).

Summary

Chapter One was an overview of the study and a preview of its organization. The statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the significance of the study were discussed. Information pertaining to the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the significance of the study were discussed. Chapter One also contained information related to the significance and nature of the study, the research questions, definition of pertinent terms, philosophical and ontological assumptions, and limitations.

Chapter One was focused on the underrepresentation of African American females in school leadership positions. The problem examined in this qualitative multiple case study was that African American females are underrepresented in school leadership positions and this study

served to identify and understand the reasons why the study participants have succeeded in achieving the superintendent position. African American women encounter distinct challenges to rising in leadership positions due to being doubly marginalized in society as a consequence of both gender and race. Despite these obstacles, African American women continue to pursue leadership roles in education and, as evidenced by the participants in this study, can succeed in reaching the superintendent position. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The central question guiding this study was: How do African American female superintendents describe their success and perseverance achieving the school superintendent position? Philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks guiding this study were also discussed.

The availability of and access to proper role models plays an important role in the development of future educational administrators. Additionally, as school populations become more diverse, it is vital that school senior leadership reflect diversity as well. As a group, African American women are a minority among senior educational administrators. The current lack of representation of African American women in senior roles could be seen as an impediment to encouraging other women of color to pursue leadership roles. As an African American female educator that aspires to one day have a position in educational administration, I am very interested in understanding the experiences that led to the success for the participants of this study. The information gained through this study will add to the limited existing literature describing the experiences of African American female superintendents and provide guidance to future administrators such as myself.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

According to several scholars, women and minorities go largely underrepresented as superintendents (Alston, 2005; Cryss Brunner, 1999; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). However, a historical review of educational leadership positions indicates women held offices like that of the superintendent as long ago as the early 20th century (Alston, 2005). In 1910, women comprised 8.9% of all superintendents, and by 1930 the number increased to 10.9% (Alston, 2005). Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of the historic Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the corresponding desegregation of schools, was the loss of leadership positions for African American administrators (Alston, 2005). At the time of the Supreme Court decision in 1954, there were more than 82,000 African American educators in United States schools. In the years that followed, more than 38,000 African American teachers and administrators lost their positions, and by the 1970s, the percentage of female superintendents fell to 1.3% (Alston, 2005; Toppo, 2004).

Fortunately, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of female superintendents. By 1990, the percentage of female superintendents in the United States had risen to 6.6%; and by the year 2000, the percentage nearly doubled to 13.2% (Cryss Brunner, 1999; Glass et al., 2000). However, the vast majority of superintendents (87%) were male (Cryss Brunner, 1999; Glass et al., 2000). That percentage remains the same today, as there are nearly 15,000 superintendents nationally, and approximately 2,000 are female (AASA, 2020).

A review of the research in educational leadership reveals a gap in literature as it pertains to the recruitment, retention, and role of African American female superintendents (Alston, 1999,

1999; Brown, 2014; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Clair, 2000; Doughty, 1980; S. N. Jones, 2003;

Pigford & Tonnsen, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Although much of the

literature on superintendents largely represents the experiences of Caucasian men, scholars are

now developing a smaller subset of literature focused on women; however, there is very little

published literature about African American female superintendents or other women of color

(Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). More importantly, the

tenacity and resilience of those Black women who meet the challenges of the superintendency

and are successful has not been studied extensively (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

For this study, the review of the literature contains information related to theories that

may offer explanations of barriers hindering African American females in their pursuit of the

superintendency. The review also contains discussions of literature reviewing the primary

support elements African American women view as critical contributors to their success.

Background

To understand why the experiences of African American women are different from those

of other women, as well as those of African American men, one must consider the historical

progression and ideology of African American people in the United States (Howard-Hamilton,

2003). In the early 19th century, African American women were viewed not as being financial

contributors to the household, but as being supportive of their spouses and responsible for

managing domestic duties (Guy-Sheftall & Bell-Scott, 1989; Payton, 1985). Educational

attainment and leadership, according to Howard-Hamilton (2003), was not intended for African

Americans, particularly for women. During this time, African Americans were concerned with

uplifting their race, and not on gender issues (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). African American

women and girls occupied the lowest rungs of the social ladder and opportunities were limited

(Allen, 1997; Hazzard, 1982; King & Ferguson, 2011; Peterson, 1996). Furthermore, historical and societal perceptions restricted women to the position of caretaker instead of leader (Caceres-Rodriguez, 2011).

However, some African American schools with African American teachers and leaders were in place during this time, and with the landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to implement school desegregation and end the legalized racial separation in America's schools, there was hope that the educational experiences of African Americans would improve as equal access to funding, facilities, and resources would be made available (D. Bell, 2004). Instead, the persistence of Jim Crow laws and other racial segregation led to many African American teachers, principals, and even superintendents being demoted or terminated in resistance to integration efforts and, as described by Tillman (2004), upended the economic, social, and cultural structures of the African American community. Over 6 decades after *Brown v. Board of Education*, African American administrators are still grappling with the challenges of societal positioning and obstacles in gaining leadership roles in the educational system.

Theoretical Framework

Applying appropriate theoretical frameworks in the study of African American female superintendents can be challenging because many theories are very general and do not consider multiple identities and roles (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Several theoretical frameworks offer lenses for understanding the intersecting identities of African American women and explaining ways in which their needs can be addressed effectively. These frameworks include CRT, Black feminist thought, sociocultural theory, and feminist critical theory and intersectional perspectives.

Critical Race Theory

CRT is a theoretical framework generated by scholars of color to address racial subjugation in society (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002). Villalpando and Bernal (2002) asserted the idea that persons in power designed laws and policies that were supposed to be race-neutral, but still perpetuated racial and ethnic oppression, stating the CRT "framework emphasizes the importance of viewing policies and policy making in the proper historical and cultural context to deconstruct their racialized content" (pp. 244–245). According to critical race theorists, ideas such as color blindness and meritocracy that are supposed to provide help and support to rectify wrongs, instead systematically disadvantage people of color and further advantage Caucasians. Avoiding the issue of race allows individuals to concede only egregious racial aggressions while other types of covert racial atrocities are avoided, neglected, and excused (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001.

Research by Villalpando and Bernal (2002) and Delgado and Stefancic (2001) on CRT illustrates how laws and policies that were assumed to be race neutral, instead can be implemented by individuals in power in ways that continue to perpetuate racial oppression. According to the theoretical framework of CRT, ideals such as colorblindness and meritocracy can be used to systematically disadvantage African Americans and other people of color. Rather, the refusal to acknowledge the presence and impact of race allows individuals in power to "redress only extremely egregious racial harms, ones that everyone should notice and condemn" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 22). Furthermore, when these allowances are made, additional microaggressions can also be ignored, neglected, and excused (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002).

CRT is an appropriate framework for the study of African American females in educational leadership as it prioritizes race and racism in the research and challenges the

traditional discussion of race, gender, and class by illustrating the impacts of these social constructs on communities of color (Solórzano et al., 2002). A major emphasis of CRT is on the transformative experience it allows for African Americans and other people of color by focusing on the multiple elements that compose their identity, including race, gender, class, and socioeconomic status (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The transformative experience is possible because of CRT's utilization of counter-stories to refute the existing ideas and stereotypes held by members of the majority group. Counter-stories that are positive and uplifting provide a shelter and alternate view to create a space of validation and support. In creating counter-stories and safe spaces, African American females may remove the assumption that they are alone in their plight or marginality, as support is necessary for perseverance in the face of adversity.

Black Feminist Standpoint Theory

Similar to CRT, Black feminist standpoint theory also emphasizes improving the conditions of marginalized groups. Standpoint theory seeks to empower these groups by offering opportunities to present personalized accounts of their everyday world that may be contrary yet are more useful than those depicted by the majority, dominant group (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987). Also similar to CRT, Black feminist standpoint theory also provides credibility and value to the marginalized group by challenging the traditionally accepted portraits predominantly depicted in literature (Collins, 1990).

Collins (1990, 1998, 2000, 2002) has published several works discussing Black feminist thought and its connection to the experiences of African American females in leadership positions, particularly in academic settings. Collins's research on Black feminism suggests African American females have been in marginalized positions for quite some time and are viewed with the interloper status: while they have been superficially included in dominant

spaces, they remain outsiders due to their invisibility and lack of voice and agency within the group.

Collins (1990, 1998, 2000, 2002) further asserted that the African American female can never truly feel ingratiated because there is no personal or cultural connection between her experiences and those of the dominant group. Black feminist theory emphasizes the importance of cultural membership, as the success of African American females, even while positioned as outsiders, is due in part to their ability to take advantage of the opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to make sense of the world in a way others cannot and learn how to work harder to achieve their goals (Beard, 2012).

Several themes are central to Collins's (2002) theoretical framework of Black feminist thought. First, the overall framework is influenced by the experiences of African American women throughout their lives. Inherent in this theme is the understanding that others besides African American women have attempted to shape and erroneously define their identity, and that these false images are crafted to oppress assertive African American female behaviors (Collins, 2002). In addition, the false identities are immersed in oppressive and subordinate statuses and used for the domination of women. In response, Black feminist theory stresses the importance of valuing oneself and defining oneself as a means of validation to counter the negative images that are created outside of the African American woman. For African American women, Black feminist standpoint theory allows their lived experiences to provide a framework for understanding and giving meaning to experiences resulting from the intersection of race and gender (Collins, 1990, 2000, 2002).

The second theme stresses that while the experiences of each woman are unique, commonalities and intersections do exist (Collins, 2002). Multiple identities of race, gender, and

class are intersecting elements of most African American women's identities, but dominant groups see these multifaceted identities as oppressive and subordinate the significance by selecting either/or dualities (Collins, 2002). Hence, there are multipronged barriers erected by dominant groups to set boundaries for African American women's succession.

The third theme emphasizes that while commonalities do exist among African American women, the diversity in identifiers such as class, religion, age, and more provide multiple contexts for understanding their experiences (Collins, 2002). Because the lives and narratives of African American women have been shaped by so many external influences, this theme encourages the development and reclaiming of their stories through dialog and storytelling to assess knowledge and root in their importance in African American women's culture (Collins, 1990, 2002; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Although Black feminist theory is focused heavily on elements of identity, valuation, and validation as means for resilience and persistence for African American women in a dominant culture that may be inhospitable to them, the philosophy of Black feminist thought is not as fully entertained by many, as these women do not embrace the mainstream definition of feminism (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). However, Collins's (2002) discussion of the Black feminist theory and explanation of its central themes do provide a context and framework for African American female superintendents seeking to clearly establish a voice for themselves and not accept the depiction placed on them by external groups.

Sociocultural Learning Theory

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that human development occurs from a dynamic interaction between individuals and society. Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory suggests development depends on interaction with people and the tools that the culture provides to help form their own

view of the world (Gallagher, 1999). This theory emphasizes the dynamic nature of this interaction and stresses the idea that society does not just impact people; people also impact their society (Gallagher, 1999).

Based on Vygotsky's theory, there are three ways a cultural tool can be passed from one individual to another (Gallagher, 1999). The first one is imitative learning, through which one person tries to copy the behaviors of another. The second way is by instructed learning, which involves remembering the instructions of the teacher and then using these instructions to self-regulate one's actions. The final way these tools are passed to others is through collaborative learning, which involves a group of peers who strive to understand each other and work together to learn a specific skill (Gallagher, 1999).

Because Caucasian men dominate educational administration positions, most of the coursework in administrative preparatory programs reflects the Caucasian male perspective, which is not a perspective resonating with African American women (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Lemasters & Roach, 2012). However, the lack of African American female representation in the superintendency makes them unavailable to serve as role models or as part of support and has the negative effect of perpetuating an already unjust situation (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Calderone et al., 2020).

Because the population of African American female superintendents is small in number, in many respects it could be said that these women are underrepresented within the superintendency ranks (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). African American female superintendents' scarcity in the nation's school districts may make their practices and achievements in this role invisible to other African American females who aspire to this position. Carroll (1982) wrote,

There is no more isolated subgroup in academe than Black women. They have neither

race nor sex in common with White males who dominate the decision-making stratum of

academe; Black males in academe at least share with the White males their predominance

over women. (p. 118)

The African American woman must define herself, and her success is dependent on her ability to

find places to share her experiences with others like herself that can provide support and

understanding (Carroll, 1982).

Feminist Critical Theory and Intersectional Perspectives

Previous studies and research have documented the negative impacts of stereotypes,

stereotype threats, overt and covert discrimination and daily microaggressions can have on the

leadership progression of women (Chase & Martin, 2019; Guiterrez y Muhs et al., 2012; J. L.

Martin, 2018; Rodela et al., 2019; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tooms et al., 2010). The overwhelming

impact is the diminished number of women in leadership, and the underrepresentation of African

American women in particular, in educational institutions. The danger is that without a diverse

teaching group, with culturally diverse teaching practices, the opportunity gap for educational

attainment will persist (Milner, 2007).

A review of the literature on women in educational leadership positions clearly indicates

stereotypes and discrimination have been pervasive and persistent over time (Davis &

Maldonado, 2015; Gaetane et al., 2009; Gresham & Sampson, 2019). Two theories that are

helpful in understanding the impact of stereotypes and discrimination are feminist critical theory

(Ackerly, 2000) and intersectional perspectives (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991), as they

illustrate how race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identity markers impact women holding or

attempting to gain leadership positions in K-12 education administrations and are helpful in

understanding the overt and covert forms of discrimination and stereotyping that women and minorities must endure and overcome on their leadership journey.

Feminist critical theory considers both historical oppressions and implications as well as current struggles faced by marginalized populations (Chase & Martin, 2019). Analysis, critique, and finding solutions to counteract the negative, oppressive social forces of the social structures that maintain and support majority group dominance and that status quo are central to this perspective because these forces also serve to maintain the loss of voice and marginalization of women and other minority groups. Practitioners of feminist critical theory seek to embrace and encourage the multiplicity of women's voices to dispel the idea that all women speak collectively and can be represented by one woman's experience and emphasize that women do experience unique problems because of their sex (Chase & Martin, 2019).

CRT, Black feminist standpoint theory, sociocultural learning theory, and feminist critical theory and intersectional perspectives address the struggles experienced by African American women, particularly due to racism, sexism, classism, loneliness, microaggressions, marginality, and outsider status (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Despite these challenges, African American women continue to advance in leadership roles in educational leadership. The tenacity and resilience of the African American women who do meet the challenges of ascending to the superintendency and are successful have not been studied extensively. A review of related, relevant literature follows in the next section.

Related Literature

A historical review of the literature on educational leadership reveals many researchers erroneously assumed the findings of studies on Caucasian male leaders could be generalized to explain the experiences of female and minorities or persons of color in similar leadership

positions (Brown, 2014; J. R. Martin, 1984; Shakeshaft, 1989). While these early studies did provide important information relevant to the challenges and successes on the career path to superintendent, the experiences of females have been quite different from males, with the experience of African American female superintendents distinctly different from the experiences of Caucasian female superintendents. These differences can be highlighted by African American females' divergent and racial pathways to educational leadership positions (Gewertz, 2006).

History of African American Females' Ascension Into Educational Leadership

At the beginning of the 20th century, education and teaching were considered a leading profession for African American women (Shakeshaft, 1989). By the 1920s, the number of African American women in the workforce exceeded that of Caucasian women (Shakeshaft, 1989). Many African American women opened schools and served as both teacher and administrator for these schools (Giddings, 1984; Green, 1967; J. Jones, 1980; Shakeshaft, 1989).

In the 1930s, Jeanes supervisors began to populate the schools. Funded by the philanthropic efforts of Anna T. Jeans and the Jeanes Fund, Jeanes supervisors were predominantly college-educated African American females that were sent into rural areas in southern states to improve educational conditions for African American children (Alston, 1999; Alston & Jones, 2002). Approximately 2,300 Jeanes supervisors worked in 16 states and, in addition to providing educational assistance, the women worked in the community to help families, organized health department vaccinations for school children, raised funds for new schools, and helped teachers develop lesson plans (Alston, 1999; Alston & Jones, 2002). Despite the benefit of additional funding and support, the Jeanes supervisors also experienced the same issues of power and race experienced by African American females that preceded them (Alston & Jones, 2002; Botsch, 1996; Smith, 1997).

In 1999, Barbara Jackson conducted an extensive study to review the history and biographies of 32 African American female superintendents in office from 1993–1994 as well as focus on their lives, motivations, and impact (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Four major themes that emerged from Jackson's study. First, the women interviewed had strong support systems and experiences during their youth that, unbeknownst to them, served to prepare them for future leadership. Second, although the women expressed difficulties staying in the job (turnover is high in these positions), each woman believed they were making a real difference for students. In other words, their optimistic attitudes and outlook sustained them. Third, all the women that persisted in the superintendency learned to embrace their public persona and visibility in their communities. Finally, contrary to the popular misconception that African American women are not as well prepared as others, the achievements of the women interviewed demonstrated they were amply qualified and ready for leadership, as demonstrated by their advanced degrees, robust experience in the field, and strong connections to their communities (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). The findings of Jackson's study suggest two philosophies of thought that may be used to explain the deeper meanings behind African American females' persistence in the superintendence despite the many obstacles they face: tempered radicalism and servant leadership (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000).

Tempered Radicalism

Prior research has emphasized the positive impact of having African American educational leaders—teacher and administrators—in professional positions in schools serving as role models and for African American children (Campbell, 2015; Magee, 2016; Nicholson, 1999). When women are in leadership positions, there is the dual impact of gender and race, but there is also the dual challenge of perceived competing agendas of race and gender (Rusher,

1996; Tyson, 1998). In addition, African American women are very aware of the disparities they may encounter due to both race and gender (S. N. Jones, 2003; Meyerson, 2001).

Collins (1998) and Crenshaw (1991) described the paradigm of intersectionality as seeking to understand the multiple connected lines of identity and provide an analysis of how intersections of race, class, gender, or sexuality influence group experiences in a variety of social contexts (Collins, 1998). As referenced in the discussion of the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought, intersectionality helps African American women reconcile their lived experiences with their intersecting identities of race and gender commonly used to reinforce power imbalance and oppression (Collins, 2000). In response to intersectionality, African American women are placed in spaces of subordinance and must transform this power imbalance into an effective vehicle for change (Lorde, 1984). Meyerson and Scully (1995) labeled these actions tempered radicalism.

Meyerson and Scully (1995) described tempered radicalism as a strategy with which organizational insiders use their leverage and knowledge of the organization to make just enough change on issues they care about, but not so much change they impair their effectiveness. Tempered radicals are individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations; they are committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization, according to Meyerson and Scully. Tempered radicals want to become valued and successful members of their organizations without compromising on who they are and what they believe in (Alston, 2005). However, the ambivalent stance of these individuals creates a number of special challenges and opportunities as they resist organizational pressures to conform and pressures from social movements to be more strident (Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

African American women choosing to pursue positions in educational leadership are tempered radicals both historically and contemporarily (Alston, 2005). As African American women take on these roles, they take on the dual challenges that race and gender pose to their success. Recognizing that race, class, and gender are markers of power in any situation, these factors often become tools for oppression. However, the dual impacts of race and gender, compounded by the perceived power inherent in increased educational attainment, can create personal and professional problems for African American women, forcing them to use the power originally intended as a mechanism for oppression and instead transform it into an effective vehicle to facilitate change (Alston, 2005).

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership researchers recognize the role that values, beliefs and other character dispositions play in the enactment of leadership. Studies on servant leadership identified specific character attributes alongside a well-described list of actions characterizing servant leaders and the behaviors they employ as part of their leadership practices (M. Bell & Habel, 2009; Sumanasiri, 2020). Servant leadership describes how a leader could profoundly respect other human beings and still operate to achieve organizational goals (M. Bell & Habel, 2009). In discussing Greenleaf's (1991) description of servant leadership in terms of its effect on others, M. Bell and Habel (2009) noted three questions posited by Greenleaf (1991): Will the servant leader's influence cause individuals to grow as people? Are these individuals in turn likely to become servant leaders? What will be the lasting impact—will the least privileged in society benefit or be further harmed? (Greenleaf, 1991).

African American female superintendents represent the contemporary model of the archetypal servant leader: someone that consciously chooses to first serve others and in their

quest of to provide leadership (Alston, 2005). Cryss Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) noted many of the characteristics shared among African American female superintendents align naturally with the concept of servant leadership. Female superintendents demonstrate a strong sense of efficacy and dedication to the care of children, practice survival skills, and use collaboration that is relational and consensus building (Alston, 2005). Many African American female superintendents refer to their pursuit of the position as obedience or adherence to a higher calling directing them to lead others, and they carry this belief in their leadership practices in their respective districts and communities (Alston, 2005).

Transformational Leadership

Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Van Engen (2003) determined through a meta-analysis of 45 studies that women show more transformational leadership traits than do men (J. L. Martin et al., 2018). Transformational leadership includes traits such as charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (J. L. Martin et al., 2018). According to Gupton and Slick (1996), transformational leaders advocate for participatory management to motivate others by transforming their self-interest to into the organization's goals. The traits of transformational leaders are valuable because transformational leaders are skilled in leadership practices that inspire better performance by encouraging participation and recognizing all points of view (Gupton & Slick, 1996). Transformational leadership requires relational leadership and places high value on mentoring and communal experiences, establishing connections between people.

Another important aspect of transformational leadership is that is nonhierarchical and nonpatriarchal. In transformational leadership, the named leader shares the task of leading by recognizing and utilizing the strengths of those in the organization to reach shared organizational

goals. Decisions and leadership tasks are shared, which supports empowerment of all individuals in a collaborative context (Eagly et al., 2003; J. L. Martin et al., 2018).

Women utilize transformational leadership because it requires empathy and a sense of caring for others. Additionally, transformational leaders often deny their own self-interests for the good of the whole organization, another trait exhibited by women more than men. Research suggests transformational leadership is the most effective style of leadership and, while women most often utilize the transformational leadership style, there remains a lack of women in the highest levels of leadership (Dreher, 2003; Hopkins et al., 2008; West & Curtis, 2006; White House Project, 2009).

Superintendent Profile

Glass et al. (2000) conducted a study for the AASA to provide comprehensive information on the superintendency. In the AASA's 10-year examination of the superintendence, women accounted for 13% of superintendents who responded to the survey (Glass et al., 2000). Survey results indicated male and female superintendents were approximately the same age, with 70% of superintendents aged 55 or younger. Additionally, the same proportion of males and females reported serving in large, medium, and small districts. However, 72% of males reported serving in districts enrolling fewer than 3,000 students, compared to 60% of females (AASA, 2000).

The career paths for men and women are also similar, and include teaching, then principalship, followed by a central office position. Males traditionally begin the process in their mid-20s, whereas females typically transition from teaching into their first administrative role in their early 30s (Gewertz, 2006). Correspondingly, in the AASA (2000) survey, female superintendents reported spending more time as teachers before moving into administration,

spending 7–10 years as a teacher, compared to 5–6 year of classroom time for males (AASA, 2000). More female superintendents (73%) also reported more time spent in professional development activities, compared to the numbers reported by males (39%).

Interestingly, both male and female superintendents cited professional development as beneficial for advancing career opportunities for women. Specifically, both male and female superintendents emphasized improving instruction and knowledge of the instructional process and curriculum as significant factors for women's advancement (AASA, 2020). Additional abilities cited as important for female career advancement included the ability to maintain organizational relationships as well as interpersonal skills and responsiveness to community groups (Gewertz, 2006). Other factors commonly reported as important to advancing career opportunities for women in the superintendence include interpersonal skills, ability to maintain organizational relationships, and responsiveness to parents and community groups (Gewertz, 2006).

Many female superintendents perceived the most important reason their school boards hired them was their ability to be instructional leaders. Factors women identified as favorable to their success include cumulative education, experience, and endorsement. Survey data corroborate this perception, but while school boards profess high interest in instructional abilities, they also report budget experience and fiscal resource management of critical components of superintendence (Gewertz, 2006). The AASA 2016 study indicated that school boards place great emphasis on budgetary and financial decisions as key hiring criteria. However, 82% of female superintendents surveyed reported their impressions that the school boards did not view them as strong managers, and 76% of female superintendents reported that school boards did not view them as fiscally competent (AASA, 2016). Additionally, 61% of

female superintendents reported feeling a glass ceiling exists in school management as a barrier to their promotion (AASA, 2016). In contrast, only 43% of male superintendents shared the perception that school boards viewed women as less capable of managing a school district (AASA, 2016).

Whitaker and Lane (1990) noted that gender can determine assigned roles as organizations tend to fill upper management roles in accordance with the existing managerial image. In educational leadership, this gender bias can lead to men being viewed and ultimately selected over women to be leaders due to the existing leadership structures with men comprising the majority of senior leadership roles (Cryss Brunner & Kim, 2009). Men have traditionally been viewed as better equipped to handle challenges such as student discipline, financial management, negotiations with school boards, and the politics of school administration (Logan, 1998). In additional to gender bias, unfavorable working conditions may discourage women from applying for superintendent positions (Harris et al., 2004). Women report inequity in terms of pay, promotions, and authority (Eagly & Carli, 2007) as well as needing more education and experience when compared to men for the same administrative leadership positions.

Women's Perceptions of Leadership

Despite decades of progress, women in leadership positions must still consider how they are perceived in response to the numerous stereotypes—gendered, racial, ethnic, class—placed upon them by their peers in the profession (Chase & Martin, 2019). While education is viewed as a predominantly feminine profession, the leadership and higher ranks of administration are primarily dominated by men and research shows that because of this male dominance, female leaders must work to counter or overcome the negative perceptions of their capabilities when compared their male counterparts (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Méndez -

Morse et al., 2015; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998; Shakeshaft et al., 2007). When women acknowledge and accept the stereotypes placed upon them, they may experience additional stress, perceive their opportunities to be less than those of men, and may not seek promotions or other leadership positions for fear of failure. This fear of failure and feeding into the stereotype by negatively representing their gender, race, ethnic group, or class may perpetuate the cycle of fewer women entering leadership positions and lack of diversity represented in higher administrative positions (Chase & Martin, 2019; Dreher, 2003).

There can also be consequences for women who do not adhere to their prescribed gender roles. These consequences can include social ostracism and negative feedback such as being described as cold, bitter, and selfish when women possess and display the same personality characteristics normally exhibited by their male counterparts (Heilman et al., 2004). Research has shown women who deviate from traditional norms and behave in ways traditionally stereotyped as male are less well-received than are men who deviate from tradition norms (Heilman et al., 2004; Superville, 2016).

Women are also devalued in comparison to male leaders when leading in a stereotypically masculine manner (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly et al., 1992). The devaluation is exacerbated when these women occupy leadership roles in male-dominated arenas such as educational administration (Eagly et al., 1992). Additionally, when male evaluators are used, women in leadership positions are evaluated more harshly than when evaluated by other women (Eagly et al., 1992; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

With respect to African American women in leadership positions, Gaetane et al. (2009) described their experiences of gendered racism as "double jeopardy" due to the intersection of both gender and racial stereotypes that had an oppressive impact on their leadership progression.

Davis and Maldonado (2015) stated the intersectional struggles of African American women in leadership positions, when race converges with gender, creates a double-standard dichotomy for African American women that can lead to negative impacts such as overt and covert discrimination in their workplace. These intersectional struggles can serve as negative forces that over time, can harm the leadership development of African American females. Intersectional struggles and conflict can also negatively influence the career choices of African American females, reducing their access to leadership positions and creating more ambivalence concerning their ability to successfully lead (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Gaetane et al. (2009) found that African American women were able transcend these stereotypes by utilizing leadership styles based in inclusivity, consensus building, and collaboration. Because of the intersectional realities faced by African American women, as leaders these women become bridges of support for others (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Both the bridge, and bridge building, are necessary for African American women because by virtue of possessing multiple minority statuses, African American women must work harder than their peers to overcome the racial and gender stereotypes they encounter, despite feeling "invisible, voiceless, discriminated, isolated, undermined, treated unfairly, oppressed, and challenged" (Davis & Maldonado, 2015, p. 59).

Due to these negative experiences of African American women in leadership, bridges in the form of mentors and sponsors are necessary for survival. Sponsors are able to mirror the intersectional experiences of the African American women as leaders when they need to validate their experiences of gender and/or racial oppression as real and true (Davis & Maldonado, 2015) by describing one's own experience (Gaetane et al., 2009, p. 564). Sponsors and mentors can assist African American women in other ways such as understanding microaggressions and

outsider status and assisting African American women in leveling the playing field by applying

political savviness to avoid potential professional landmines (Davis & Maldonado, 2015;

Gaetane et al., 2009). Finally, African American female leaders, due to their intersectionality, are

often excluded from informal networks and doubly devalued due to both race and gender (Davis

& Maldonado, 2015; Peters, 2012). Sponsors and mentors can be in positions to assist African

American women in understanding the rules of the organizations and how to appropriately

leverage them for success (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Thomas, 2020). Unfortunately, the critical

level of support that can be provided by sponsors and mentors is often overlooked and

undersupplied (Peters, 2012).

Disparity in performance evaluations is another negative impact of intersectionality

experienced by African American female leaders. When evaluating performance, research shows

effective performance is more likely attributed to ability when the leader is identified as a

member of the dominant group as opposed to an outsider; if the outsider is successful, their

success is more likely attributed to luck rather than ability (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993).

Leaders that are members of the in group and perceived to perform well because of ability are

also evaluated as more deserving of promotions than outsiders whose success were attributed to

luck or effort (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993). Further research shows this generalization is

not limited to gender, because it also applies to other minority statuses such as race, gender

identity, and sexuality (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993; Lugg & Tooms, 2010; Munoz et al.,

2014; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2008; Nunez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2012).

When viewed as outsiders, the success of African American women to achieve leadership

positions is not perceived as the logical outcome of their hard work, talent, or drive, but instead

as a product of affirmative action policies erroneously believed to operate to fill quotas for

diversity (Foster, 2015). These perceptions are not only inaccurate, but can also cause great harm to African American female leaders as they serve to discount their talents and abilities in favor of random luck (Chase & Martin, 2019). The expertise, knowledge, and positive outcomes created by African American female leaders can be discounted and overlooked as well (Crenshaw, 1991; Cryss Brunner & Kim, 2010), perpetuating the dearth of African American women in educational leadership positions (Alston, 2000).

Another way to explain the differences in evaluations of African American women when compared to Caucasian women or Caucasian men in managerial positions is attribution theory or attribution error. According to attribution theory, the personality characteristics (and personal accomplishments) of women and men are perceived differently primarily based on gender (Kirchmeyer, 1998). In attribution theory, the accomplishments of women may again be attributed to luck or some other external factor such as affirmative action and not to personal ability or perseverance (Kirchmeyer, 1998; Lyness & Thompson, 1997). Additionally, a woman's impressive performance on tasks traditionally associated with male characteristics is also often attributed to luck, while men's performance is attributed to skill (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993).

In attribution theory, the reason for the differences in attributions of luck versus skill when comparing women and men in leadership positions can be explained by the assumption that success must not violate people's presumed sex role expectations. To avoid cognitive dissonance, the observer assigns negative attributes to women and positive attributes to men even when observing the same behaviors (J. L. Martin et al., 2018). The resulting explanations that women are fortunate, and men are skilled, reinforces the notion that women are not responsible for their own successes and therefore may not truly have the ability and skill to lead.

Gender role stereotypes exist and create a double standard that negatively impacts the evaluation of women in leadership positions (Dreher, 2003). While the percentage of women in leadership positions has increased, the perception that women are unqualified to perform in these leadership capacities has persisted (J. L. Martin et al., 2018). The small number of women that have been successful in achieving leadership positions has not been able to change the perceptions and stereotypes of women in general, and instead is viewed as the exception to the stereotype (Cryss Brunner & Kim, 2010; Pardine et al., 1995).

The negative impact of gender role stereotypes is amplified for African American women due to the intersectional, double-jeopardy influences of both gender and race, compounded by erroneous understandings of affirmative action policies (Dreher, 2003). Because women in leadership roles are not seen as representative of women in general, their accomplishments do not dissuade long-held societal beliefs about the qualifications and abilities of women in higher level management positions (Pardine et al., 1995). Rather, these intersectional struggles and attribution errors may act to further discourage women from pursuing these positions (Pardine et al., 1995).

Superintendents of Color

Among the participants in the 2000 AASA study, 8% identified as superintendents of color, compared to 7% of the women superintendents who responded in the later 2016 study. While the data collected on the experience of Caucasian male and female superintendents seemed similar in many ways, there were distinct contrasts in the experiences of superintendents of color, especially for African American females (Gewertz, 2006).

In terms of career advancement, the majority of African American women do not obtain superintendencies as quickly as do their Caucasian counterparts, with only 56% of African

American females hired within the first year of actively seeking a superintendency, compared to more than 70% of Caucasian females. Furthermore, 25% of African American females reported waiting 5 or more years to obtain a superintendency, compared to only 8% of Caucasian females and 9% of Caucasian males (AASA, 2016).

In characterizing the influence of school boards, data indicate superintendent candidates of color are more successful when the school boards are more diverse (Gewertz, 2006). According to the AASA (2016) survey, 58% of female superintendents of color reported their school board included at least two members of color, whereas 12% of Caucasian female superintendents and 9% of all Caucasian superintendents reported having similarly diverse school boards.

As previously noted, most female superintendents believe they were hired to be instructional leaders. However, 8% of African American female superintendents reported feeling they were hired to be community leaders as well, compared to only 3% of Caucasian female superintendents expressing similar beliefs (AASA, 2016). Additionally, female superintendents of color are twice as likely as Caucasian female superintendents to report feeling they were hired as change agents brought in to lead reform efforts (Gewertz, 2006; Robinson et al., 2017). As such, female superintendents of color express feeling the additional burden of having to prove themselves by achieving these additional outcomes (Cryss Brunner & Kim, 2010).

Today's Superintendents

In early 2021, the AASA released the *2020-21 AASA Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study*, which marked the fifth edition of this study. This survey tracked the demographics, salary, benefits, and other elements of the employment contracts of school superintendents throughout the country and was based on the responses of 1,509 participants (AASA, 2021). Consistent with

the results of previous years' surveys, male respondents outnumbered female respondents by four to one and were overwhelmingly (89%) Caucasian. The survey showed the number of superintendents identified as female rose to nearly 24%, 48% of respondents reported that they served in suburban and urban districts, and 53% of respondents self-reported serving in rural districts (AASA, 2021).

Three major takeaways on the state of female superintendents can be gleaned from the 2021 AASA survey. First, similar to the results of the 2000 survey, female superintendents still enter leadership roles later in life with considerably more experience than that of males. The median age reported for female superintendents was 53 years old, compared to 51 years old for male superintendents. Second, male superintendents earn significantly more than their female counterparts. The median salary reported ranged from $140,172 to $180,500, depending on district size, with African American superintendents reporting a median salary of $106,000 compared to $160,000 reported by White superintendents (AASA, 2021). In terms of salary, male superintendents earn more than female superintendents in the majority of district sizes. Finally, superintendents of color, and females of color in particular, are still underrepresented in leadership positions. Data indicate school leadership is overwhelmingly Caucasian, with male superintendents of color representing only 7% of all male superintendents and women of color comprising 13% of all female superintendents (AASA, 2020).

African American Female Superintendents

Although descriptions in the literature are sparse, survey data help create a portrait of an African American female superintendent. It appears she is in her late 40s to early 50s, has been a teacher for 12–20 years, and more often than not has been in administrative positions that require her to resolve issues related to minorities and people of color (S. N. Jones, 2003; Kowalski et al.

2011). African American female superintendents are hired disproportionately in urban school districts that are poorly maintained and managed and have high minority population areas (Alston, 1999; Doughty, 1980; Jackson, 1999; Moody, 1983; Robinson et al., 2017).

Scholars disagree about the degree to which being African American and female influences the way the superintendent is perceived. Some African American female superintendents have reported feeling that their race acts as a double-edged sword. Other African American female superintendents report feeling that gender presents more of a barrier than race. Robert S. Peterkin, the director of the urban superintendents' training program at Harvard University, stated, "People have a hard time with strong African American women" due to stereotypes that exist concerning women in leadership that get compounded by race (Gewertz, 2006, p. 22). According to Peterkin, gender and race can be used to discount the wisdom offered by the leader and permit others to supplant the information with their own ideas (Gewertz, 2006).

Parks (2010) noted the list of expectations to define African American women in the social realm can be daunting. The list includes words such as reliable, self-sacrificing, redeemer, fierce guardian, unstinting, and rescuer (Parks, 2010). Parks stated that while the list is not possible to achieve, it is still accepted and expected by the dominant culture as well as by African Americans. Woods-Giscombé (2010) coined the term "strong Black woman" (SBW) to describe this persona and Sharp-Grier (2013) took this idea a step further by creating the superwoman schema.

The superwoman schema encompasses a set of variables to analyze and examine the SBW which included a system of characteristics, contextual factors, benefits, and liabilities related to the SBW role which incorporate the need for the SBW to manifest strength, suppress emotion, resist being vulnerable and/or dependent, and possess a strong drive to succeed and an

obligation to help others (Parks, 2010). Over time, these traits have become normalized and incorporated into society as the racial and gendered description of the African American female yet are in direct opposition to accepted representative of the feminine ideal (J. L. Martin et al., 2018). As such, African American women must make conscious choices about how they must navigate themselves in response to the conflict posed by these dichotomies. The conflict born of these models and navigating two sets of expectations can lead to manifestations of stress, uncertainty, and other physical and psychological responses and, ultimately, to the small numbers of African American women in leadership positions.

Additionally, the SBW role reinforces the socialization of African American women into gender roles that emphasize emotional stoicism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Frame et al., 1999; Lightfoot, 1980). In accepting this culturally appointed role of SBW, older African American women instilled this disposition into future generations as a way of ensuring their ability to navigate the social world that lay before them as self-reliant, robust "superwomen" able to manage themselves and their environments (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Williams, 2008).

In this manner, SBW were taught to mask their true selves as a means for emotion management as an effective leadership style, and to negate the impact of the microaggressions and macroaggressions encountered in their daily lives (Rodriguez, 2006). Lively (2000) identified two types of emotion management employed by individuals in leadership positions: individual and interpersonal. Individual emotion management is the management of oneself and interpersonal emotion management is the management of others' emotions. African American women engage in individual emotion management on a heightened, hypervigilant scale in comparison to other groups (J. L. Martin et al., 2018). As part of the SBW personality, African American women have learned to suppress and internalize feelings of frustration in dealing with

others that view them as incapable and assumes stereotypical behaviors. African American

women have also learned to tamper down or swallow individual feelings of grief, fatigue, and

fear in order to maintain the appearance of emotional stability in the workplace (Beauboeuf-

Lafontant, 2005).

The maintenance of self-emotion, competence, and stoicism in personal demeanor, all

while engaging in caretaking behavior has been shared as indicative of the workplace experience

of African American women in leadership positions. Goffman (1959) referred to this practice as

"face work" and described it as the idea that individuals must conduct themselves in ways that

allow others to only see their desirable attributes. They also actively engage in buffering

behaviors, such as code-switching and emotional management as a self-defense and to control

the situations in their workplace (Cross et al., 1999).

For African American women, this concept of face work is a way of life and a style of

leadership. African American women have learned that in order to be successful in leadership

positions, they must manage their behaviors both toward themselves and others, construct their

own identity, and actively take steps to ensure others only see them as composed, competent,

stable leaders (Swann, 1987). While the methods of emotion management and face work has

been utilized by African American women as effective means of maintaining control in the face

of forces seeking to diminish their status and influence, these behaviors also serve to propel the

SBW myth and may impede their progression and acceptance as legitimate leaders (Erickson &

Ritter, 2001; Hochschild, 1983; Lively, 2000).

To be successful, African American women must ultimately overcome the dilemma many

female leaders face, likeability versus authenticity (J. L. Martin et al., 2018). In their leadership

roles, women must determine whether they will play the game and adhere to the presumed

gender and/or racial roles and stereotypes, or be their full, authentic, true selves and face the consequences that come with challenging the status quo (J. L. Martin et al., 2018). Research has shown likeability is not a challenge encountered by men, as they do not have to compromise their selves to be accepted (Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Hochschild, 1983; Lively, 2000). However, the likeability challenge is particularly salient for African American women within the context of their leadership roles. Perhaps as more African American women persist in achieving leadership positions as their true selves, separate from the SBW persona, gains can be made to see the truer version of the African American female as legitimate and can then serve as a model for future generations of African American women to forge healthier and more complete models for effective leadership development.

Summary

Chapter Two included an overview of theories and literature related to African American females and the superintendency. A historical background included a review of the roles that women, particularly African American women, have played in the development of the educational system in the United States and their leadership progression over time. In addition, a review of several theoretical frameworks, including CRT, Black feminist thought, sociocultural learning theory, and feminist critical theory presented lenses for understanding the intersecting identities of African American women and explaining ways in which their needs can be addressed effectively. Finally, a review of the literature included a discussion of the many challenges faced by African American female leaders in diverse organizations and provided descriptions of leaderships styles and models employed by African American female leaders to overcome these challenges.

Only a small number of African American females have succeeded in breaking from the norm and have been successful in achieving this senior post. Jackson (1999) asserted African American females have consistently accumulated a lifetime of experiences that work to prepare them for leadership. Collins (1990) emphasized the duality of African American females having to negotiate sexism as well as racism throughout their career ascent. Despite these difficulties, African American female superintendents are able to demonstrate their preparedness to lead. It is because of their ability to overcome difficult circumstances, systemic barriers, and complex interactions, that African American females are poised to succeed in such a unique, dynamic, and multifaceted position such as the superintendency (Doughty, 1980; Edson, 1988; Nicholson, 1999). African American females' success in educational leadership was gleaned while enduring hardships. As such, their success and persistence to an increase in number warrants further study. Qualitative studies of African American female leaders and decision makers are lacking (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). There are studies available focusing on gender or race separately, but there is little research that examines the intersection of race and gender and the impact on leadership progression (Brown, 2014; Collins, 1990).

The myth of meritocracy and denials of inequality still exist in many areas of American culture and workplace (J. L. Martin et al., 2018). Research indicates stereotypes, stereotype threat, overt discrimination, covert discrimination, and microaggressions serve as pitfalls and impediments for all women, and particularly for African American women and others that do not possess dominant or majority statuses (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Despite years of progress and increases in the percentage of female leaders, they are still forced to think about how they are perceived based on the stereotypes held by others and must decide whether to conform to traditional gender-role norms or demand the status and success they have worked to achieve

(Gresham et al., 2019; Takiff et al., 2001). Yet, there is still a need for diverse leaders and specifically women in educational institutions (Allred et al., 2017; Paludi & Coates, 2011; Sebastian, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. It is my hope the lessons gleaned from their experiences may offer encouragement and motivation to succeed while informing the practices of future African American female superintendents.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The participants were able to share their stories as well as personal and professional experiences to describe how, as African American females, they are able to persevere and be successful in achieving the position of school superintendent. The data collection encompassed interviews with 11 current and former school superintendents, a focus group with five superintendents, and documents and personal artifacts provided by all participants. The data allowed me to understand the driving forces that motivate African American females to obtain the superintendency and remain committed to this role for successive years. The information gleaned will help bring understanding to the conditions African American females face in their leadership pursuits and provide guidance for other African American females that desire to complete a similar endeavor. In this chapter, the details of the design and context of the study and the participant and site selections are outlined. In addition, the data collection methods, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations are reviewed.

Design

Qualitative research is a broad approach for studying phenomena that take place in the natural world (Creswell, 2007). The focus of qualitative research is to study a person or thing in its natural setting, attempting to understand or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people may bring to them (Creswell, 2007). Case study refers to a qualitative examination that provides an "intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an

individual, group, institution, or community" based on a diverse array of data collection materials (Ary et al., 2006, p. 456). Yin (2003, 2018) defined a case study as a social research method used to investigate a contemporary phenomenon. Case studies allow a researcher to focus in-depth on a specific incident or occurrence and maintain a practical, comprehensive perspective (Yin, 2018, p. 5). As such, case studies are best suited for research that meets three main criteria: (a) the main research questions ask how or why a phenomenon happens; (b) the researcher has little control over behavioral events; and (c) the focus of the study, the case, is a contemporary phenomenon as opposed to a historical one (Yin, 2018).

The phenomenon studied in this case is the experience of African American females on their journey to achieve the position of superintendent. Only a small number of African American females have succeeded in breaking from the norm and have been successful in achieving this senior post, a trend that has persisted over time. Using a qualitative multiple case study research design, I probe past and present actions, experiences, and practices of study participants to extrapolate themes that can be applied for future discussion. The information collected provides a detailed description of the experiences of African American female superintendents and lessons learned from their leadership experiences that may be used to encourage, motivate, and guide the preparation practices of future African American female superintendents to persevere and be successful in achieving the position of superintendent.

The depth of knowledge obtained through qualitative research provides a framework for solving challenging and complex issues by providing a rich description of the study subject. The case study method is an appropriate research design for this study, as this method establishes a framework that allows for investigating the variety of experiences of African American women in educational leadership positions (Yin, 2003). During this case study, the participants shared

personal and professional experiences that identified significant beliefs, behaviors, and support systems that aided in their ascent as African American female school superintendents.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How do African American female superintendents describe their experiences in pursuit of achieving the school superintendent position?

Research Subquestions

SQ1: How do African American female superintendents describe their path to success in achieving superintendence?

SQ2: How do African American female superintendents describe the strategies and experiences contributing to their perseverance in superintendence?

Setting

Currently, there are approximately 15,000 superintendents serving in the United States (AASA, 2020). Women comprise 26.7% of superintendents, and only 5% of superintendents nationwide are women of color (AASA, 2020). In Virginia, there are 133 division superintendents, 45 of whom are female and 18 are women of color (VDOE, 2021). As the Commonwealth of Virginia has experienced a sharp increase in the overall number of female superintendents (now 34% of the pool) and the number of African American female superintendents, it is appropriate that Virginia school divisions served as research sites for the current qualitative study.

Sites for the study included 10 school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Selecting all 10 school districts was appropriate as Yin (2003) suggested case study research include multiple cases to provide an opportunity to identify themes and conduct cross-case

analysis without diluting the level of detail provided by the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, each superintendent and school district was assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

District A is small, rural school system located in Southside Virginia. There are five schools in the division to meet the needs of approximately 1,616 students. District B is a midsize school system located Central Virginia in an urban community just outside a major university. There are nine schools in this school division, serving 4,559 students. District C is a midsize system, located in a community in Southside Virginia. The school division has four schools serving 2,243 students.

District D is a large school system located in an urban setting in Northern Virginia. The school division has 208 schools serving 187,797 students. District E is a large rural community located in Southeastern Virginia. There are three schools in this school division serving 7,062 students. District F is a large urban school system located in Central Virginia. There are 16 schools in this district serving 8,263 students.

District G is a large urban school system located in Southeastern Virginia. There are 46 schools in this district serving 30,087 students. District H is a small community located in Southside Virginia. There are three schools in this district serving 2,079 students. District I is a large school system located in Central Virginia. There are seven schools in this district serving 6,360 students. District J is a small urban system located in Southeastern Virginia, with six schools in this district serving 2,869 students.

Participants

In qualitative research, purposeful sampling is used to select participants exhibiting specific criteria pertinent to the study (Ary et al., 2006). African American females are

underrepresented in school leadership positions and this study served to identify and understand the reasons why the study participants have succeeded in achieving the superintendent position. Participants included current and former K-12 school superintendents who identify as African American and female and served in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. At the time of the study, there were 18 African American female superintendents serving in the Commonwealth of Virginia (VDOE, 2021). There were an additional five African American former superintendents still living in Virginia. All 18 current superintendents and five former superintendents were invited to participate in the study. A total of 11 superintendents, including seven current superintendents and four former superintendents, participated in the study.

Procedures

The sampling frame was based on a conceptualization developed by Marshall and Rossman (2006), which focuses on four key aspects: events, settings, actors, and artifacts. For this study, the event was superintendence, the setting was the Commonwealth of Virginia, the actors were African American women, and the artifacts were the documents provided by the participants. The participants for this study were selected using a combination of network sampling and purposeful sampling methods, two concepts frequently used in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Current female superintendents provided names of possible participants from their networks, and a search of directories of professional associations for superintendents and African American educators contributed to the list of identified cases as well. The criteria for participation in this study included the following: identify as an African American female, demonstrate having achieved superintendence, and reside in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Utilizing network and purposeful sampling, 11 individuals were determined to meet the established criteria for the study. The 11 women represent very different school districts and, by

fully describing multiple perspectives about the case, allowed for maximum variation representing diverse cases (Creswell, 2007). The experiences of each participant varied greatly and provided different perspectives that revealed additional issues of focus for the study.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from Liberty University prior to data collection (see Appendix A). An interview protocol was developed, and the interview questions were validated by a pilot test with school leaders that were not be included in the study to determine the appropriateness and credibility of the questions, as well as time required for completion of each interview. Recruitment began in November, immediately upon receiving IRB approval to set up interviews with the participants. Participants were initially solicited via email and phone calls, followed by a letter of invitation to participate (see Appendix B) in the study also sent by email. The informed consent form (see Appendix C) was emailed along with the letter of invitation. Each participant was provided detailed information pertaining to the purpose and parameters of the study, as well as expectations of participants.

After speaking with the participants about the study, I obtained verbal consent from each participant, and then sent emails to obtain written consent. Participants submitted the signed consent form in the days prior to the scheduled interview. During the individual interviews, participants were asked to share any relevant documents such as portfolios, resumes, training records, certificates, awards, and recognitions to support the document analysis process of the study. Preliminary demographic information pertaining to the participants' education, prior educational experience, and length of service as a superintendent were collected at the start of each interview.

Individual interviews were conducted virtually using the ZOOM virtual meeting platform with each participant at a location and time of her choosing. The interviews included visual and

audio recordings, with permission granted by the participants to record the answers. The audio recordings obtained via ZOOM were transcribed following the interview, with a copy provided to each participant to complete member checks and review the contents for accuracy. Pseudonyms are used to identify each participant, and all recordings and transcribed notes are securely stored in a locked safe in a locked storeroom. Participants provided related documents and personal artifacts during or immediately after each interview. Each case was reviewed separately individually to identify meanings and themes, and once a thorough understanding of each case was reached independently, constant comparative methods were used to determine further groupings and running themes in relation to the theoretical framework.

Additionally, a single focus group interview was conducted virtually using ZOOM in a private group setting. The focus group interview session was recorded and transcribed following the session, with copies of the transcripts sent to each participant to complete member checks and review the contents for accuracy. All data were stored on a password-protected computer. Only the faculty chair and I had access to the data collected. At the conclusion of the study, all paper records were shredded. Media, including audio and video files, were deleted from the hard drive.

The Researcher's Role

In qualitative studies, the role of the researcher is to build rapport with participants to create a level of comfort and trust (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, in qualitative studies, the researcher serves as the key instrument for data collection, and therefore must establish a rapport with the participants to work collaboratively to shape the themes that emerge from the process (Creswell, 2007). I am an African American female aspiring to one day achieve a high-ranking position in education administration. In the fall of 2020, I began teaching secondary education in

a Virginia high school. I had opportunities to meet school leaders through my new position as a

schoolteacher, as well as opportunities to speak with several of the participants while attending

women's leadership forums offered by an educational association of which I am a member.

Given the information presented in the review of literature, there were three assumptions

associated with this study of the persistence of African American female superintendents. These

assumptions addressed the difference in challenges faced by African American females, the

coping mechanisms used to overcome these challenges, and the use of case study method to

describe these experiences.

The challenges faced by African American females in their quest to become a

superintendent differ from those experienced by individuals that are male or may be members of

a different racial or ethnic group. African American females are severely underrepresented in the

population of superintendents, which is a phenomenon that has persisted over time (Blount,

1998; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Cryss Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999). Only a

small number of African American females have succeeded in breaking from the norm and have

been successful in achieving this senior post (AASA, 2020). It is possible the unique challenges

faced by African American females are a contributing factor that can provide an explanation for

the low numbers of these women that ultimately succeed in these positions.

Additionally, the coping mechanisms used by African American female superintendents

differ from those utilized by superintendents of another gender or racial and ethnic groups.

Despite the small numbers of African American female superintendents, those women who are

successful in reaching this post and serving as public school superintendents continue to meet the

challenges of educational leadership and flourish in their jobs (Alston, 2005). One assumption in

this study was the coping mechanisms utilized by African American females to deal with the

challenges faced may serve as contributing factors to their success in areas where many of their peers may not have succeeded.

This study utilized a case study approach to gain an understanding of how African American female superintendents perceive their experiences and to give meaning to the events that transpired during their career progression. The data collection included self-reporting measures such as personal interviews to collect descriptions of the individuals' experiences. The participants' interview responses provided sufficient information to formulate overarching meaning, and themes extrapolated from the participants' responses provided a full description of the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007).

In this qualitative study, I sought to understand the experiences that contribute to the success of African American female school superintendents. Jackson (1992) noted that most studies of African American women are focused on specific issues and problems. However, there is room for literature focused on African American female superintendents' positive experiences in the position and what supports, facilitates, and sustains their successes.

Data Collection

Data collected for this multiple case study of African American female school superintendents were gleaned from individual interviews, a focus group interview, and personal documents and artifacts. Individual interview data described the participants' journey pursuing the superintendence and experiences while serving in the position. The focus group interview data included multiple perspectives on the lived experiences of African American female leaders in education. Documents and personal artifacts provided by the participants further illustrated their experiences and supported the perceptions shared in the individual and focus group interviews.

Individual Interviews

In multiple case studies, the researcher serves as the key instrument for data collection, and therefore must establish a rapport with the participants to work collaboratively to shape the themes that emerge from the process (Creswell, 2007). The semistructured nature of the individual interviews allowed for commonality across the interviews by using the same core questions, while also providing flexibility to further explore aspects unique to each participant (Yin, 2018). The semistructured interview format also utilized an open-ended question format to encourage participants to expand upon the thoughts and feelings that may emerge over the course of the interview (Miles et al., 2014).

Invitations to participate in the study were extended to 23 African American female superintendents (18 current and five retired) in the fall of 2020. Participants were solicited via email and phone calls, followed up with a formal letter of invitation to participate in the study sent by email. Individual interviews were conducted with each participant at a location of her choosing virtually using Zoom with an audio and video recording made with permission granted by the participants to record the answers provided by the participants.

The interview questions (Appendix F) used in the study were designed to capture information taking into account the research questions, as well as general demographic information such as educational background, career progression, and years of service as a superintendent. The interview questions were also drawn from questions posed in earlier qualitative studies to capture similar information and add to the existing body of research.

The interviews were semistructured with the research questions serving as a guide and audio-recorded using ZOOM to guarantee the accuracy of transcriptions. Additional questions were asked in response to information garnered from participants during the interview, as the

researcher could readily predict the specific information provided from participants that may become relevant to a case, and the additional questions lad to opportunities for deeper probing and more data.

Preliminary demographic information was collected at the start of each individual interview to obtain the participant's education, prior educational experience, and length of service as a superintendent. The collected data were reported for descriptive purposes and included in the analyzed data. The experiences of each participant varied and provided different perspectives that may lead to issues of focus for future studies. The interview questions employed drew from questions posed in earlier qualitative studies to capture similar information and add to the existing body of research. Following are the standardized open-ended interview questions with the CRQ and/or the research SQs noted in parentheses for each.

1. Please tell me about yourself and the school district you lead.

2. How many years have you been in this superintendent position?

3. Please describe your career path prior to assuming the superintendent position. (CRQ)

4. What previous experiences do you believe prepared you for leadership and superintendence? (SQ1)

5. What factors do you attribute to your success in achieving this leadership post? (SQ1)

6. What obstacles have you encountered while moving toward your current leadership position? (SQ2)

7. What obstacles are you currently facing in your present leadership position? (SQ2)

8. What strategies do you draw on to overcome obstacles? (SQ2)

9. What motivates you to persist in this leadership role? (SQ2)

10. What other information would you like share about your leadership experience?

Individual Interview Questions 1, 2, and 3 are background questions and were used to document general demographic information such as educational background, career progression, and years of service as a superintendent to establish the participant's expertise in the field. Individual Interview Questions 4 and 5 were intended to describe how the participants perceive their ascension into leadership was achieved. As noted earlier, only in last 20 years have female superintendents and minority female superintendents become a focus of scholarship and research (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski & Cryss Brunner, 2005; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Tallerico, 1999). Gaining clear understanding of the experiences that contribute to the success of African American female school superintendents will be helpful in extrapolating themes that can be of aid to future African American females that aspire to superintendence.

Individual Interview Questions 6 and 7 were intended to describe how the participants perceive their persistence in the face of opposition. Cryss Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) stated, "Because educational administration programs are dominated by Caucasian men, traditional educational administration curriculum continues to hold precedence over other perspectives" (p. 533). Role models and representations of women of color in the senior ranks of educational administration are difficult to find, as the environment and culture is not one that is open, collaborative, and supportive to their perspectives and needs (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). At best, aspiring, as well as established, African American female superintendents are met with apathy; at worst, these women are met with great resistance, and institutionalized sexism and racism (Carroll, 1982; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Despite these obstacles, several African American female superintendents have succeeded in persisting in their position and providing great leadership in their district.

Individual Interview Questions 8 and 9 address social support, which is defined as the existence or availability of people the individual knows she may rely on because of the knowledge that these people care, value, and love her (Basham et al., 1983). The position of school superintendent requires a leader who is able to motivate and engage the many members of their school district (Alston, 2005). In the superintendent role, the individual is responsible for managing complex organizations and often must make difficult decisions, all while under the watchful eye of the community stakeholders and constituents. The superintendency presents a number of challenges, but despite the stress, many African American females are able to succeed and even thrive in this environment, often serving in large urban communities with hundreds of constituents (Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Research indicates the availability of social support bolsters an individual's ability to withstand and overcome frustrations and challenges (Basham et al., 1983).

Focus Group Interview

Immediately following completion of all individual interviews, all participants were invited to participate in a single focus group interview. The focus group interview session included five participants. The focus group interview was conducted at a mutually agreed-upon time and took place using the ZOOM virtual meeting platform. The purpose of the focus group interview is to foster communication among the participants about issues relevant to their experiences (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007). For this study, the African American female superintendents were invited to participate in a group interview to discuss their experiences as leaders. All study participants were invited to participate in the focus group interview and five participants agreed. The focus group interview was used to gather data from the multiple perspectives of the participants to discern the range of views on the topics discussed as well as to

gather more data. The focus group discussion also stimulated the participants to provide more

detailed information supporting their views based on thoughts sparked from the interactions with

other participants in the study. Following are the standardized open-ended focus group questions

with the CRQ and/or the research SQ noted in parentheses for each (also in Appendix G).

1. What factors do you think are significant to African American women's advancement
   into educational leadership positions? (CRQ)

2. What do you believe is the role of the superintendent in the school district? (CRQ)

3. How have you prepared yourself to succeed in the school superintendent role? (SQ1)

4. What, if any, impact do you believe your race has had on your ability to succeed in
   this role? (SQ1)

5. What, if any, impact do you believe your gender has had on your ability to succeed in
   this role? (SQ1)

6. What advice would you provide to African American women seeking the
   superintendence? (SQ2)

Focus Group Questions 1, 2 and 3 address career progression and the perceived

differences in experience due to race and gender. As noted by Gewertz (2006), there is

disagreement in the literature interpreting the degree to which being African American and

female influences the way the superintendent is perceived. These questions serve to record the

role these participants believe race and gender have impacted their career progression to

educational leadership positions. Likewise, Focus Group Questions 6 and 7 more specifically ask

for the participants' perspectives on the impact their race and gender have had on their ability to

succeed once achieving the superintendent position.

Focus Group Questions 4 and 5 were used to glean information pertaining to professional development. As noted earlier, Jackson (1999) asserted that African American females have consistently accumulated a lifetime of experiences that contribute to preparing them for leadership. Additionally, data from the AASA survey suggests female superintendents of color are twice as likely as Caucasian female superintendents to report feeling they were hired as change agents brought in to lead reform efforts (Gewertz, 2006; Robinson et al., 2017). These questions were intended to further examine these findings and determine if this sentiment is shared by the participants in this study.

Focus Group Question 6 was focused on self-reflection. The participants in this study have succeeded in reaching the superintendent post and have personal insight to the factors necessary to achieve this goal. Focus Group Question 6 was intended to gain an understanding of how the participants perceive their experiences and give meaning to the events that transpired. It is hoped their comments can be used to direct future studies into the persistence and motivational factors that may influence success in this profession.

Documents and Artifacts

Documents were included in the data set for this study and included those documents pertaining to the participants' personal and professional journeys to add an additional layer of depth to the information obtained in the interviews. The documents were used in conjunction with information obtained in the interviews to support comments and observations collected by the researcher (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007). Documents such as resumes and vitas were obtained directly from the study participants. Other documents such as school district demographics and data, superintendents' messages to constituents, participant profiles and biographies were obtained from the Virginia Department of Education.

Data Analysis

I analyzed data from the individual interviews with 11 African American female superintendents and the data from the single focus group interview with five superintendents that participated in the study to determine meaning and themes. I also analyzed the participants' resumes, biographies and district websites to determine themes. The complete data set was analyzed through coding, evaluation, and interpretation of each case as well as cross-case analysis to identify general categories and themes regarding the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia (Creswell, 2007). I took detailed notes during each of the individual interviews and the focus group interview, and while reviewing the personal artifacts and documents of the African American women who participated in the study. My notes were kept in a journal separate from the data collected to prevent influence, and I was available to revisit the data and adjust notes as new ideas emerged. Copies of the videos and transcripts were made available to each participant to complete member checks and review the transcripts for accuracy.

Once the data were organized, preliminary coding techniques were used to place data into general themes and categories as they emerged from the data review (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative date analysis software program, NVivo, was used to sort, classify, and arrange the data. Initially, the notes were organized and coded into categories reflecting the research subquestion areas of perseverance and success. Once initial categories were identified (see Appendix I), the resulting categories were examined to discern themes that emerged within the categories (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). Each case was reviewed individually to identify meanings and themes. Once a thorough understanding of each case was reached, constant

comparative methods were used to determine further groupings and running themes in relation to the theoretical framework (Creswell, 2007).

Analyzing the data through coding, evaluation, and interpretation was an appropriate analysis methodology for this study because it allowed data from interviews and documents to be categorized into themes. To construct meaning from the data, it is necessary to repeat the process of coding, evaluation, and interpretation several times (Creswell 2007). Data from the individual interviews associated with each guiding question were evaluated, coded, and analyzed independently to identify patterns and themes (Saldaña, 2016). This process was repeated with data collected from the focus group interview and again with the data from my review of the personal artifacts and documents provided by the African American female superintendents. Triangulation was utilized to compare data received from all three data sources to provide consistency in results and ensure the quality of the study.

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

Trustworthiness addresses credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Ary et al., 2006). In qualitative research, researchers must demonstrate that the methods used are consistent and can be replicated, and that the approach used is appropriate for context of the study (Yin, 2018). Utilizing methods to increase the trustworthiness also supports external validation of the study. Methods for increasing trustworthiness utilized in this case study included triangulation, member checks, two-column memoing, and an external audit.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research addresses the concern of truthfulness of the researcher's findings based on the design, methods, and context of the study (Ary et al., 2006). In establishing credibility, the evidence provided is evaluated to determine whether the results

presented provide an accurate interpretation of the participants' meaning and are not colored by the researcher's inference of meaning (Creswell, 2007). Krefting (2006) further stated that a study is credible when it presents such distinctive descriptions of the experience that it is immediately recognizable to individuals that have shared the same experience (Ary et al., 2006).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability in qualitative research concerns the consistency of results produced based on the design method used. The objective of establishing dependability is to ensure that in the event later researchers follow the same outlined procedures and conduct the same study, the same findings and conclusions will be obtained (Yin, 2018). To enhance dependability, the researcher must ensure the methods used are verifiable and can be consistently applied, the procedures are appropriate and can be documented, and that multiple forms of evidence can be used to corroborate the findings (Ary et al., 2006).

Several processes were employed to ensure credibility and dependability in the data collection process. One way to accomplish this was to employ the triangulation method via the utilization of multiple data sources to gather information. The methods used to collect data include individual interview, a focus group, and document analysis. Additional methods that were used to ensure dependability and credibility include member checks, two-column memoing, and creation of an audit trail.

Interviews were audio- and video-recorded and transcribed and member checks were utilized to ensure accuracy of transcriptions. For member checks, participants were asked to review field notes or tape recordings for accuracy. This process allowed participants to clarify recorded statements and reduced chances of misunderstandings that could jeopardize the findings

of the study (Ary et al., 2006). I reviewed transcripts and audio recordings from the individual interviews and focus groups at least three times to ensure I accurately captured all data.

Detailed note taking was utilized to provide a full picture of the environment observed and differences noted. Two-column memoing was conducted to keep track of observations made during interviews and focus groups (see Appendix D). Using two-column memoing, in one column I recorded observations and document facts obtained during the interview. In the other column, I recorded my running thoughts and reflections that emerged during the review process. This process provided an opportunity to record analytic and self-reflective notes that enriched the data collection process, made thoughts implicit, and expanded the data set (Creswell, 2007). I also maintained a reflective journal during the data collection process. My reflective memos consisted of questions, thoughts, and speculations about data that were helpful when comparing the categories and themes that emerged from the study. Two-column memoing was exercised throughout the study with the intent to minimize observer bias in the process.

Finally, an audit trail was documented for this study (see Appendix E). The audit trail outlined how the study was conducted, including the rationale for the study and decisions about whom to interview, what to observe, and why these decisions were made. The audit trail also describes how data were collected, organized, coded, and interpreted. An audit trail also provides a mechanism for replication of the study in other areas or for repeating the study to add to the body of knowledge in the area.

Confirmability in research addresses the idea of consistency and neutrality to the extent that the data collected are free of bias in procedure and in interpretation of the findings (Ary et al., 2006). The use of an audit trail is a good method for demonstrating confirmability, as it provides other researchers with detailed instructions that can be used to confirm (or disprove) the

findings using the same data and context. Triangulation of data sources is a strength of case study design and another method to enhance confirmability, particularly if the various sources reinforce the same conclusions (Yin, 2018). Finally, using a multiple case study research design enhances confirmability, as the descriptions provided by each case will provide rich, detailed descriptions from multiple sources to support the overall findings (Yin, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree the findings of the case study can be applied or transferred to other groups in other contexts (Ary et al., 2006). Transferability can be achieved through descriptive adequacy, which is defined as providing comprehensive, detailed descriptions of the context of the study such that future researchers can make adequate judgements regarding the similarity of the findings (Ary et al., 2006). Using a multiple case study design can aid transferability, as the having more multiple case descriptions can further add to the richness of the study (Yin, 2018).

This study was focused on a small number of African American female superintendents from five school divisions in Virginia. While the data collected and conclusions reached provide valuable information, overall generalizability to a large population may be limited. The experiences of each participant were unique and provide data specific to their context and frame of reference in their school division and the state, but it is possible that support systems among the participants may be somewhat transferable and may provide ideas for processes for common barrier faced irrespective of setting. While it may be possible that some findings can apply to the general population of African American female superintendents, this study applies specifically to the research settings outlined in this dissertation.

Ethical Considerations

Any research involving the use of human subjects as participants must include

appropriate steps to ensure ethical considerations are adequately employed (Yin, 2018). Formal

approval of the research plan must be granted by the IRB before any research with human

subjects can proceed and can assist in ensuring consideration for harm and risk are appropriately

addressed and mitigated (Yin, 2018). In case study research, specific care involves the following

precautions: informed consent, protection from harm, protection of privacy and confidentiality,

protection of vulnerable groups, and equitable treatment of participants (Yin, 2018).

Participants in this case study were solicited via email and phone calls, followed up with

a formal letter of invitation to participate in the study. The letter was accompanied by

information explaining the focus of the case study, criteria for selection for participation, and a

consent document and interview protocol. The perceived harm was minimal, and no deception

was used; the procedures were also outlined in the consent documents, as well as notification that

participation was voluntary, and the participant could withdraw from the study at any time. All

participants were adults and of legal age and competency to consent to participation in the study.

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to safeguard privacy and confidentiality. In terms of

reciprocity, no monetary compensation was provided; however, the participants were given an

opportunity to review their contributions to the study via the member checks and provided a

summary of the findings if requested.

Summary

Conducting a qualitative case study involves following specific methodological

procedures to fully identify, research, and present data on a contemporary topic (Yin, 2018). Yin

(2018) identified the five characteristics of an exemplary case study as significant, complete,

addresses alternate perspectives, includes sufficient evidence, and composed in an engaging manner. Making sure to establish a clear research design that includes the five necessary components—research questions, propositions, the case(s), the logic linking the data to the propositions, and criteria for interpreting findings—will guide the path to a successful case study.

The focus of this multiple case study was the motivation and persistence of African American female superintendents. Specifically, this study represents an effort to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent. Using the research design and data collection methods discussed in this chapter provided a clear picture of the experiences that has led each participant to the position she holds today.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Four is to present and analyze the data gathered while exploring the experiences of African American women in their professional and personal journeys to become a superintendent in school districts in Virginia. A brief introduction of each participant, including information such as participants' education, prior professional experience, and length of service as a superintendent, is provided to establish context for the different perspectives presented. Participant introductions are followed by the presentation of results delineated by two major themes and six associated subthemes that emerged from the individual interviews and focus group interview. This section also incorporates discussion of analysis procedures including coding, evaluation, and interpretation of each case, as well as cross-case analysis of the themes and categories reflecting the research sub-question areas of perseverance and success. The results will be presented in narrative form supplemented by visual aids where appropriate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

This study was an exploration of the lived experiences and leadership progression of current and former K-12 school superintendents who identify as African American and female and served in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. A total of 11 African American female superintendents participated in the study, to include seven current superintendents and four former (retired) superintendents. As shown in Table 1, the participants represent a broad range of years of experience as educators and as superintendents, as well as serving in both rural and urban school districts, which allowed for maximum variation representing diverse cases. The data depicted in Table 1 was gleaned from individual interviews and review of participant

documents and artifacts. Superintendents and school districts were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1

Superintendent Participants

Superintendent participant	Years in education	Years as superintendent	District type	Acting or retired	Focus group participant
Angela	18	3	Rural	Acting	No
Brooke	39	15	Urban	Retired	Yes
Cheryl	29	3	Rural	Retired	Yes
Denise	25	>1 (8 months)	Rural	Acting	Yes
Erika	23	1	Rural	Acting	No
Frances	34	10	Urban	Acting	No
Georgia	25	5	Rural	Retired	No
Helen	44	15	Rural	Retired	No
Maxine	38	2	Urban	Acting	Yes
Nancy	30	8	Urban	Acting	No
Olivia	33	2	Urban	Acting	Yes

Although the interviews interrupted their summer breaks, all the participants were very engaged and very respectful as they mitigated health and safety issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the superintendents' need to attend to these pressing operational issues did cause scheduling complications and it became necessary to conduct all interviews virtually, which also precluded the opportunity for richer observations of in-person settings. Also, as some of the participants were retired and years removed from the specific experience that was the focus of this study, the acting superintendents tended to express their thoughts with more details and timely examples. Despite those barriers, the following participant introductions and

descriptions provide foundation and context for the interview conversations specific to the superintendents' leadership experiences.

Angela

At the time of the study, Angela had served as superintendent for 3 years and was the youngest participant in the study. Angela described her district as rural, predominantly African American (76% of students), with 97% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Angela started her career as a special education teacher and worked with students in the elementary, middle, and secondary levels for 7 years before moving into an administrative position. Once she made the leap to administration, she held a variety of positions including director of secondary instruction and career and technical education (CTE), director of career services, discipline officer, and assistant supervisor of instruction. In these roles, Angela also had the opportunity to work with departments such as facilities management, operations, nutrition services, finance, transportation services. Angela stated she felt all of these additional roles helped her to prepare for superintendency because she was able to see the larger picture of how a school division should function. However, she said she had no intention of becoming a superintendent and it was the suggestion of a male mentor that she enrolled in a leadership program and acquired an endorsement in administration and supervision, which started her on the course to superintendence.

Brooke

Brooke served as superintendent of the same district for 15 years before retiring and embarking on a new career path after serving in education for almost 40 years. She described herself as a "mom, grandmother, wife, and active community member." Brooke described her district as urban and diverse in ethnicity—38% African American, 47% White; 10% English

language learners, with 43 different languages spoken in the district—and socioeconomic status ranging from the very wealthy to economically depressed with 47% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Brooke said she never wanted to work in education and enjoyed a career working with disabled adults before entering the profession as a substitute teacher. However, the substitute teaching position ignited a love of teaching in her and she continued teaching for 10 years before transitioning into her first administrative position. After a serving in a series of positions in the central office, including director of leadership development and K-12 instruction director, Brooke was appointed to an assistant superintendent position and was assigned every department except finance. She made a point to participate in finance meetings to gain knowledge and believes this wide berth of opportunities, as well as incredible mentors she had along the way, prepared her for a long and successful tenure as superintendent.

Cheryl

Cheryl served in the position of superintendent for 3 years before retiring and starting a new entrepreneurial pursuit. Over the course of her 29-year career in education, Cheryl served in many different types of divisions, including suburban, rural, affluent, and poor. She worked at all levels in leadership roles, including math lab coordinator and assistant director for CTE, and was recognized for being her district's first Black building-level leader when she was appointed CTE director. She went on to become assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent for instruction at two different school divisions before ultimately becoming a superintendent. Cheryl said these varied administrative positions helped her to connect to instructional delivery, learning styles, teaching styles on all levels. She also served as faculty sponsor for both sports and academic student organizations, such as cheerleading and student council, in addition to her

teaching and administrative duties. She recognized these sponsor positions as outreach opportunities that allowed her to connect with the students, parents, and the community.

Denise

At the time of the study, Denise was at the beginning of her superintendent experience, having just assumed the role in December of the previous year. She also became superintendent at a chaotic time, with the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing and the former superintendent having resigned during the summer. Denise shared that she is a wife and mother and credits her husband with putting her through college and graduate school as she did not have any degrees when they married. Denise described her district as rural and said the diversity of the students is around 12% if all African American, Hispanic, and Asian student counts are combined. The district's special education population accounts for 18% of students in comparison to the gifted population, which is 10%. Denise has spent her entire educational career in the district that she now leads, starting as a student, then teacher, followed by serving in a number of administrative roles such as principal, director of curriculum and instruction, and director of K-5 curriculum. The only role she has not held was assistant superintendent, but she does have the distinction of being the first female and the first African American superintendent of the district that she now leads.

Erika

At the time of our interview, Erika stated she was a month and a few days into her second year as superintendent. Erika defined her district as a small rural school division in Central Virginia that has a composite index of 0.80, which means that 80% of the school division's budget is expected to be paid by the locality. This composite index of 0.80 in is among the highest in the state, primarily because the major employer in the area does an excellent job

supporting the school divisions as far as taxes. Erika described the school division as predominantly African American as it has a ratio of about 70% African American and 30% other, which tends to be almost exclusively White. In terms of education, Erika earned an undergraduate degree in biology and said having learned the scientific method for problem solving, she uses that scientific method every day of her life to slow it down and think about all the different components when it comes to decision making and the problem-solving process. Erika also described herself as a prolific writer—book author, article writer, and researcher—and prides herself on having achieved that over the years. She described her career path first and foremost as a mother for 20 years and says she uses this perspective as a parent when making decisions for the district. After completing her doctorate, she served as a business consultant for both public and private businesses before transitioning into education as a tutor, initially an Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) tutor. She then went from being a tutor to a teacher, assistant principal, principal, director of accountability and assessment, assistant superintendent for over 12 years, and then superintendent for the last year. She said she felt it important to hit every one of the necessary steps to become superintendent.

Frances

At the time of the study, Frances had been an educator for over 34 years and served as superintendent for a total of 10 years. She was in her third year as superintendent in Virginia, having previously served as superintendent for 7 years in another state. Frances said her current superintendent position is her first job in a predominantly African American community and as an African American woman it is important that she be a role model and advocate for the children and families in her district. Frances also described her district as segregated by zip codes and neighborhoods with about 25% of the population in poverty and underperforming. To

overcome this, the community has a program that sends students to college for free and the district has two high schools for innovation and a middle school for drama and STEM. Frances began her career in education as a science teacher (chemistry and biology) and then became a lead teacher for other science teachers. At the encouragement of her supervisor, she applied for and ultimately became the director of science and math and then rose to assistant superintendent and served for 5 years in that role. As she moved up in rank, Frances took on more responsibilities, such as the sustainability committee, character education, partnering with schools overseas, and all things instructional. She said at each step she felt her supervisors preparing her to one day take the reins and become superintendent, which gave her the confidence to keep going and ultimately gain the top leadership position.

Helen

Helen served as superintendent for 15 years before retiring and transitioning out of K-12 education. She described herself as a career educator who thoroughly enjoyed working in the field and in retirement has tried to stay abreast as much as possible. Helen worked in the same district her entire career, serving as a secondary English teacher for 9 years and then advancing to the director of instruction position, which was eventually renamed the assistant superintendent for instruction. She served as assistant superintendent for 20 years before becoming the superintendent and led the district for the next 15 years. Helen said once she moved to central office she worked in every capacity in the district, except transportation and the cafeteria, and believes these experiences and educational background prepared her to lead. Helen also shared that as the superintendent of a small district, she had to do many jobs and wear many hats because she did not have the financial capacity to hire staff to attend to these additional responsibilities. At the time of her superintendence, the school district started out with about 800

students, but shrank to about 600–650 students at the time of her departure, primarily due the district being rural with not a lot of amenities for young people and, as students graduated and families moved away, the regional economy depressed. She believes this is an issue with which the district continues to struggle.

Maxine

At the time of the study, Maxine was approaching the end of her second year as superintendent. When the former superintendent retired, Maxine was appointed interim supervision superintendent and performed the duties of the superintendent while matriculating through the formal interview process. She was then formally appointed as superintendent later that year. Like several other study participants, Maxine spent her entire educational career in the district she now leads. She grew up and attended the schools within the city and stated she has been a leader as early as preschool as she and her siblings helped to integrate the then segregated schools in the city. After completing her K-12 education, she obtained an undergraduate degree from Virginia State University and completed her master's degree at the University of Virginia, her endorsement in administration supervision at Virginia Commonwealth University, and her doctorate at Virginia Tech. Maxine said her educational career has come full circle, starting as a sixth grade teacher for 12 years in the building where her current office is located, then becoming an administrative intern, principal of summer school, assistant principal, director of instruction, division director of testing, assistant superintendent for instruction and personnel, deputy superintendent, and now the superintendent. Maxine called her district a good place to live as it is one of the fastest growing areas in Virginia and a great global city, deeply rooted in history with battlefields from both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. She lives downtown in the old town section of the city on the same street where she grew up. The district

has five schools, and the central office building houses the Head Start, early childhood, and special education programs during the day and the alternative program for the high school and Boys & Girls Club in the afternoon and evening.

Nancy

At the time of the study, Nancy had served as superintendent in Virginia for 2 years. Prior to her current appointment, she served as superintendent for school districts in Georgia and North Carolina. She was the first African American and second female to lead her district in North Carolina. Nancy has been an educator for 30 years, and previously served as director of human resources, as a principal, and as an assistant principal in Georgia. She began her educational career as a math teacher in the school district she currently leads and noted many of the parents of current students were once her students and remember her as a teacher and as their principal. In terms of her educational background, Nancy has a bachelor's degree in mathematics and business management, a master's degree in secondary school administration, and a doctorate in educational leadership. She was also selected to participate in the prestigious Broad Superintendents Academy. Nancy described her district as high poverty and small when compared to other districts in Virginia and to the larger districts she led in Georgia and North Carolina, but the district has a lot of industry and opportunity for growth. She also described her district as a very supportive, bedroom community that is very caring; with many families that are connected to each other as well as to the larger community. However, she is very concerned about the high poverty rate and stated the focus of her tenure will be to strive for academic excellence and support students' social, emotional, and mental growth so they develop the skills and abilities necessary to lead a productive life.

Georgia

Georgia served as a superintendent for 5 years before she retired and transitioned to higher education. She began her educational career as a business teacher, and she shared that even when she was a child she was always teaching. She shared a memory from her childhood when she was playing in the backyard and would create homework assignments for children in the neighborhood, selling them for a quarter. Georgia said at the time she did not aspire to be an educator, but she loved her principals and teachers, and eventually went on to teach for 3 years, then became an assistant principal, then principal, then director, and ended as a superintendent for 5 years and before she retired from K-12 education. She said she believes God connected her to the right people to propel her into leadership and put her in positions to make a difference in others' lives, which continues to this present day. At the time of her superintendence, none of the schools were accredited, but in her first year Georgia and her team were able to achieve full accreditation and maintain it for 2 years. The entire community celebrated this feat, and the celebrations raised the morale of not only teachers, but the morale of the student, their families, and the entire community.

Olivia

At the time of the study, Olivia had served as superintendent for 2 years in Virginia and has been an educator for over 33 years. Prior to her current appointment, she served as deputy state superintendent and chief academic and digital learning officer for the North Carolina department of education for 10 years, as well as superintendent for a school district in North Carolina for 3 years. Prior to becoming superintendent in North Carolina, she served as the state director of K-12 curriculum and instruction; chief academic officer for the school district of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and assistant superintendent for the East Baton Rouge Parish School

System in Louisiana. She also served as a principal in College Station, Texas and has the distinction of becoming one of the youngest principals to be named president as well as the first African American president of the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals. In addition, she was named the Texas Middle School Principal of the Year. Olivia stated she is inspired by the women in her life and shared a memory of herself at an early age assisting her illiterate grandmother to vote by reading the ballot to her. She followed up that story by stating that she chose education as her life's work because she understands the power of education to change lives and feels compelled to help others lead full, productive lives, as she helped her grandmother to do. She also sees everything as an opportunity to lead, and as a classroom teacher took opportunities to serve on state level boards and expand her network by belonging to professional organizations and traveling to other regions. Regarding the school district she currently leads, Olivia described it as high poverty with students earning low test scores. To that end, her goal in accepting the appointment to superintendent is to focus on employability of the students so they may earn a living wage upon graduation.

Results

This section includes the results of this multiple case study to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Data used in this analysis were collected from individual interviews of the 11 participants, a focus group interview involving five of the participants—two retired and three acting—and a review of documents and personal artifacts provided by the participants. The qualitative data analysis program, NVivo, was used to sort and arrange the data, which were then organized and coded into categories reflecting the research subquestion areas of perseverance and success. The resulting categories were examined to discern themes using

significant statements made by participants identified at each step in the analysis (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). Individual themes were further analyzed and used to develop major themes as the final step in the process. The major themes and subthemes were identified by phrases that captured the essence of the participant statements that inspired them. The themes and corresponding subthemes are identified in narrative form in the following sections.

Theme 1: Desire to Succeed

The first major theme that emerged from the data was a desire to succeed. This theme encompassed ideas of being properly prepared for leadership by achieving the appropriate level of education, following the correct career path, willingness to be a trailblazer and a change agent, and finding the right mentors and sponsors to facilitate their eventual success. Present in all three sources of data was a desire to succeed, which served as the foundation for the superintendents' eventual achievement of the position and guided their steps in this journey. Credibility, courage, and relationships emerged as subthemes to this major theme (see Table 2). The credibility subtheme encompassed ideas of being properly prepared for leadership and being recognized as a credible leader and included data regarding the superintendents' education as well as previous titles and positions prior to their appointment as superintendent. The courage subtheme refers to having the courage to confidently lead even when the course may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. The relationship subtheme refers to building networks and connections necessary to support and advance the ascension into leadership roles.

Table 2

Major Theme 1: Desire to Succeed

Subtheme	Code
Credibility	Career path (76), education (19), experience (21), work ethic (7)
Courage	Trailblazer (21), change agent (8), different route (5), leadership (5)
Relationships	Networking (39), mentors (14), sponsors (6)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

Credibility

The concept of credibility in preparation to lead constituted the first subtheme for the major theme of desire to succeed. In the individual and focus groups interviews, all the participants highlighted their advanced education and the deliberate choices that were made in their career paths as assurance that they were more than qualified to hold the position of superintendent. The resumes and vitas provided by the participants affirmed the advanced degrees and outlined the professional development activities completed in preparation to pursue additional leadership roles. Across all data sources, all participants spoke specifically about the importance of earning a terminal degree (doctorate) in education. Erika stressed the importance of education when she offered this advice to future administrators:

Complete that doctorate. That's one of the first things that they will say; it's like, "Oh no, she doesn't have a terminal degree," and it doesn't matter what job you're applying to, it goes a long way to say, "Oh, I've checked that box too."

Brooke echoed this sentiment: "Make sure you are knowledgeable and have more [knowledge] than your peers." Regarding their career journey, again across all data sources, in the individual and focus group interviews as well as in the personal artifacts provided, the participants demonstrated evidence of following a deliberate path to gain experience in every level of education and leadership. Some participants even exceeded expectations by accepting positions

in the state department of education and institutions of higher education. A summary of these steps is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Participants' Career Path

Name	Teacher	Principal	Central office	Assistant superintendent	Superintendent	State department	College professor
Angela	X	X	X	X	X		
Brooke	X	X		X	X	X	
Cheryl	X	X	X	X	X		
Denise	X	X	X		X		
Erika	X	X	X	X	X		X
Frances	X		X	X	X		
Georgia	X	X	X	X	X		X
Helen	X		X	X	X		X
Maxine	X	X	X	X	X		
Nancy	X	X	X		X		
Olivia	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Angela explained the importance of having a wide berth of education and knowledge: "All of these additional roles helped prepare for superintendency because the experience in operations and finance helped to see the who picture of how a school division should run and where to go." Finally, Erika effectively summarized the sentiment expressed by all the participants about making sure credibility was not an obstacle to their leadership progression:

> I think as a Black female, had I skipped any of those necessary steps, it would have been
> used against me. And if you look around at other superintendents, there's the mentality
> that if you are White, and certainly if you are White and male, you don't necessarily have

to go through the same trials and tribulations of others. So as a Black female, I do feel

having served in all those capacities makes me better prepared.

Courage

The concept of courage to lead constituted the second subtheme for the major theme of

desire to succeed. The courage subtheme refers to having the courage to break the mold and do

the unfamiliar; to go into the unknown. Many of the participants shared they were either the first

female, the first African American, or the first African American female to be appointed

superintendent of their district. These participants did not have the benefit of someone that looks

like them to model the way to succeed when all eyes are on oneself in an unfamiliar and possibly

uncomfortable new environment. In her interview, Cheryl shared these thoughts on the

importance of courage:

> The African American female route is different. So, I say, be confident in yourself, as
>
> your confidence inspires others and sets the course. I think of Reagan after Challenger
>
> explosion or Bush after Hurricane Katrina . . . you need to be able to assure people you
>
> know the way and can lead the way, that you can empathize, project confidence, inspire,
>
> and encourage.

All participants agreed it is important to project confidence and courage, even when they did not

necessarily feel it, as paramount to their success in being accepted as superintendent in their

district and trusted to do the work.

Relationships

The concept of relationships and relationship building, constituted the third subtheme for

the major theme of desire to succeed. Across all data sources, the participants demonstrated the

importance of connecting with others in leadership to aid their own leadership development. The

importance of networking and having mentors was also mentioned many times in the individual interviews and focus group as well. In the focus group interview session, Cheryl shared, "I would definitely say, networking, and having mentors, and you know, modeling the way, and being supportive and advancing women in this field, in all admin positions and education, but especially the superintendent." Maxine echoed this sentiment in her individual interview when she stated,

> Friends, resources, networking. I can't know it all, so tapping in on what other people bring to the table and can help me do. If I don't know how to do this I don't, I'm not embarrassed to say come help and then, if it's something I can do to help you, reciprocate that.

In her individual interview, Denise shared the personal impact networking has had on her leadership development:

> The networking has been very powerful and has truly helped me as a new superintendent, just to network because this is what I'm finding, many divisions have dealt or are dealing with some of the same situations. So, some of the superintendents in the Region A cohort, they are very experienced superintendents, they are veterans, and just first and foremost the networking there, to listen and to digest what they're saying, ask questions. The relationships that you build can serve you well, and they are serving me well now. So, I think it all boils down to the relationships, networking.

Denise also summarized the value of relationships in the focus group interview: "I think I am where I am because other people saw something in me that I didn't see and gave me that encouragement, along with my work ethics and support system."

Theme 2: Determination to Continue

The second major theme that emerged from all sources of data was determination to continue and encompassed three subthemes of resilience, impact, and support system (see Table 4). The resilience subtheme included data that referenced possessing internal fortitude to persist when met with impediments to success, such as the impact of race and gender. As Maxine stated in the focus group interview, "Most superintendents are males; it's a male dominated field. Most superintendents are White males, 75%, and in the nation only 6% are of color and female." The participants believed their only recourse was to work harder than their counterparts to gain access to the same opportunity. In her individual interview, Denise explained,

> I work at things. I'm a hard worker. I'm a harder than hard worker. Even when I feel like I can't go on, I still go on. And that wears you out, but I'm a hard worker. My work ethic is something that I have always had, and we grew up working hard, we didn't have a choice. I think that I've had to prove myself, to do more to prove myself than, and I don't say this respectfully, than a White male would. Mind if you look at my vitae, I've done a lot done and if you look at my vitae, I have done a lot during my career, and some maybe even White females probably would not have had to accomplish as much to get to where I am. I had to dot all the i's [and] cross all the t's.

The subtheme of resilience also included operating with the mindset of a "Superwoman" to accomplish tasks that appear insurmountable. Cheryl voiced this concern in her individual interview:

> We are given divisions that are in trouble or struggling, districts no one wants, and we are supposed to be Superwoman to fix without any support and while we are hands-on

leaders, we need organizational leadership and understanding of all components and must

not burn out.

This statement regarding struggling districts was corroborated by data found on the school

district websites and VDOE reporting. Additionally, data from the AASA 2020-21 salary and

benefits survey indicated all 100% African American superintendents that participated in the

study described their districts as in declining economic condition, whereas only 27.89% of White

superintendents described their districts as declining (AASA, 2021). The subtheme of impact

included data focused on the participants' perceived impact or influence that their presence in the

superintendent position has on others and the responsibility to continue to inspire others and

included sentiments such as making a difference and visibility. The subtheme community

support included data on the variety of resources the participants used as sources of support to

sustain and motivate them to persist in their work and include items such as encouragers, faith,

and support networks (see Table 4).

Table 4

Major Theme 2: Determination to Continue

Subtheme	Code
Resilience	Internal fortitude (16), superwoman (7)
Impact	Making a difference (50), visibility (8)
Community support	Encouragers (8), faith (5), networks (19)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

Resilience

The concept resilience constituted the first subtheme of the major theme determination to

continue. All participants spoke about understanding the route to leadership will involve setbacks

and the importance of not letting these incidents detour the path forward. Olivia shared that her

road to superintendence involved trying again and again before finally getting appointed, as she

was a finalist on three separate occasions before finally getting her appointment. Olivia believed

a primary reason she was bypassed was because she "didn't look the part of who they wanted as

next leader." Erika reaffirmed this belief when she discussed the need to push forward in her

individual interview:

> I would also say you need resiliency. It might not happen for you as a Black female, as it
> will for others. I think the mere fact of who I am, has made the journey, I don't want to
> say difficult because that's not true. But I've had to work harder to get here . . . any Black
> female will probably tell you that, any Black female would say that to you. . . . As a
> leader, there has to be a stick-with-it attitude.

In the focus group interview session, Denise offered these words of encouragement, sharing how

she uses resilience to be courageous:

> I think the only thing I do want to touch on is I think my experiences, one of the
> experiences is being resilient, because you are going to get knocked down. But I think
> sometimes mentally, emotionally, and you must train yourself and have some systems or
> some supports to pick yourself back up and keep going because leadership is courage and
> knowing how to be courageous in the midst of a storm. And I had to learn that that was
> hard, resilience and being courageous even when you're the only one around you, being
> courageous, and where I am now, if you're not courageous you will not make it. So being
> courageous helped me with the resiliency and the courageousness that you need.

Impact

Impact constituted the second subtheme of the major theme determination to continue.

Impact refers to the participants' awareness of their presence in the schools and community may

serve as role models and inspiration for those around them to succeed. The participants

commented on the importance of this impact and how it serves as a motivator to persist in their

leadership journey. Erika described this motivation in her individual interview:

> I am motivated by the success of students, and the success of students that look like me,
> the success of students who have a similar background as me. I grew up in a small rural
> community in Alabama, and once I come across that water it really reminds me of home
> and wanting to . . . to make an impact beyond just with my own children. And I like to
> think after all these years, I know the path to success. I also know the barriers that
> students are going to experience . . . and making sure we're exposing them to it in the
> schools motivates me every day to kind of get up and come into work.

Georgia spoke about the responsibility she felt to use the position to be transformational and

make a lasting, positive impact on the people and community she served:

> Well, one thing I will say is that it's important in the leadership journey to be
> transformational. It's about changing the situation. Once you've got the experience,
> you've been doing it a while, in the end I believe, the goal is to be transformational. It's
> our job to make a difference. When we're working with people, you're transforming . . .
> you don't want them to be the same in the end under your leadership as they were when
> they began. That's the goal . . . you're building capacity.

The capacity that Georgia referred to is the ability for good leaders to pay it forward and produce

future leaders. As discussed with the subtheme relationships under Theme 1, desire to succeed,

the participants concurred on the value they placed on being able to connect with established

leaders to guide their leadership journey. Likewise, all participants agreed that as leaders

themselves, they also have the obligation and privilege to share the knowledge they have gained

to build up others. Additionally, just as seeing leaders that looked like them would have been

impactful on their belief that African American women can lead school districts, the participants understood the influence they can have on other African America women seeking administrative roles.

Community Support

Community support is the third subtheme of Theme 2, determination to continue. Community support refers to the variety of social support structures (emotional, informational, instrumental, or appraisal) participants utilized to boost morale, gain new perspective, and motivate them to help resist the idea of giving up during tough times. The data included in this subtheme include encouragers from the participants' personal lives that provide emotional support such as empathy, love, trust, and care. Maxine talked about the important role her family and community plays in sustaining her leadership journey:

> I remember my commitment and that I took an oath to do this job to the best of my ability. I am deeply rooted in this community and I'm on the shoulders of many wonderful people that have helped me in my journey to get here and I don't want to disappoint them, especially my son, who tag teams this journey with me as well, and now, in the absence of his dad, that we do whatever it is Vic [her deceased husband] would expect us and me to do.

> Faith is also included in this data set, as many participants referenced their belief in God as a source of strength as well as comfort during the individual interviews as well as in the focus group interview. Denise spoke about her reliance on faith, stating that she is sustained by,

> my faith and my prayer life and heaven. My faith and my prayer life, along with my hard work has served me well. I try to remain humble and think about what God would want us to do and that has helped me.

Maxine also spoke about her faith:

> I am faith based. My faith is sustaining and what gets me through the day, every day, and with all of the accolades and awards and support I get, you know, I give God the glory first, you know, I'm not ashamed to say that.

> Networks, both formal and informal, is the last component of the community support subtheme and refers to the support provided by members of the participants' teams and professional groups. The members of these networks provide informational support such as advice, suggestions, or information for improving a situation, as well as appraisal support that may be useful for self-reflection and evaluation. Denise discussed the value she places on her team when she shared the following comments about her office staff:

> My central office staff is very good. They include my assistant superintendent; she's been an assistant superintendent, oh my goodness, 15, 16 years in the division. She brings a wealth of knowledge and she's very honest with me, she'll say, "Denise, I don't know if that's going to serve you well." And when she says that, that serves me well because I listen. We have a strong director of instruction, human resources. We're a team. I can go to them and say, "I'm thinking about this," and they'll be honest and say, "You probably don't want to do that." And I'll say, "Okay, help me understand." So, the honesty that people bring to me. I love it. I'm okay with it.

Maxine agreed with Denise and added, "You cannot do the work alone, so you have to build a team that is empowered, that you set high expectations for and support them in doing the work, but always keep the focus on what's best for children." Erika also stressed the importance of having a connection with the community she serves as a crucial component to her success:

Developing a rapport with the community is what I was saying as one of the reasons why I feel as if I have moved to the top of the ranks, in addition to my education and past experiences, and being visible in the community. I do not live here. But most people assume that I do because I'm here on the weekends. Last night was our national night out, so I was here at night up until eight o'clock. On Monday I'm doing a town hall meeting after work hours for parents. And you want to be in the community. If there's any major events that happened in [Sunbelt County], I'm always there. I am determined to be an integral part of the community by being involved in pretty much all aspects of the community.

The participants' extensive involvement in formal networks such as professional organizations and associations, as well as informal networks such as community groups, religious organizations, and civic leagues, was expressed in the interviews and also evident in the information included in their personal artifacts (e.g., resumés, vitaes, school district websites) as many received awards and special recognition for their accomplishments in these endeavors.

Outlier Data and Findings

An unexpected finding that presented in the data was the role compensation may play as a motivator to succeed and persist. Traditionally, the inequity that exists in terms of hiring and compensation, such that men are hired and paid more than their female counterparts, led participants to discuss their love of education and children as reasons why they entered this field. Maxine specifically expressed this sentiment:

It's not the work to be self-serving or on a power trip or after the salary. Truthfully, they can't really pay you enough for what it entails and it's not, you know, not about the title. This was pretty much a natural progression and I'm so blessed for the years and the

opportunity and how grateful I am to be able to serve in this position as I coordinate my career as an educator.

Almost all the participants made a similar statement during the interviews. The only exception was Erika, who conversely was very candid in describing the satisfaction she feels regarding her compensation:

I love the 15th and the 30th of every month. My mentor, a Black female, said no matter how high you go in life there are certain things you want to make sure of and one of them is that you're paid pretty much higher than the next male who would come into the position. It was hard for me to negotiate my salary and then say, I'm not going to move here. But I can say I'm one of the highest paid superintendents, might be the highest, considering the size of the school division that's taken into consideration. Because money for me, it's still a motivator. It motivates me every day to get up and go to work. And I have a little saying, and it's check the check. So on the 15th and the 30th of every month I check that pay stub because it makes me smile and I say okay, finally, I have reached this level of success. So yeah, I'm still motivated by money.

Erika is an outlier because while research supports that male superintendents earn significantly more than their female counterparts, she is one of the highest paid superintendents in the state. The only exception in terms of salary was districts serving 10,000–24,000 students; however, Erika leads a smaller district of a little more than 700 students. Erika realizes her high salary is unusual and, as such, it serves as a significant motivator for her to continue in the superintendent position.

Research Question Responses

Data collected from individual interviews, a focus group interview, and documents and personal artifacts provided by the participants were used to answer the central research question and two research subquestions. Two major themes, desire to succeed and determination to continue, emerged from the responses provided by the participant interviews and documents. The themes connection to the central research question and two research subquestions are discussed in the following sections.

Central Research Question

How do African American female superintendents describe their experiences in pursuit of achieving the school superintendent position? The participants described their experiences as challenging due to the pressure to overcome the traditional perceptions of school leadership (Major Theme 1), but also rewarding when they surmount these challenges (Major Theme 2) and can do what they love: educate children. Helen discussed her leadership philosophy:

> I have never believed you should be in education, or a leadership role if you didn't enjoy what you were doing and know that you could do a great job at it . . . you will always have challenges, and that you can overcome them. It's just a matter of maintaining a positive outlook and building on what you already know, building on your experiences. The leadership experience is fulfilling. And again, it will have its challenges, but just know that you can do it. I knew that I had educational preparedness that was needed. Being confident in my skills. Understanding that no matter what you do, you have challenges, and you need to be able to meet them and rely on your inner strength to get the job done.

As illustrated by Helen's quote, the participants agreed school leadership positions can be challenging, but also rewarding when the challenges are overcome, and positive, impactful results are achieved. The first major theme, desire to succeed, encompassed ideas of being properly prepared to lead while the second major theme, determination to continue, focused on the supports necessary to continue in leadership despite the obstacles encountered. Inputs from every data source, individual interviews, focus group interviews and participant artifacts, indicated that participants perceived preparation, courage and relationships as vital components that undergirded their desire and ability to succeed in pursuit of superintendency. Likewise, data from all sources indicated resilience, impact, and adequate support systems reinforced participants' determination to continue once superintendency was achieved.

Research SQ1

How do African American female superintendents describe their path to success in achieving superintendence? Participants described their path to success as deliberate in terms of achieving a terminal degree and following a defined career progression to be seen as credible and competent to lead (Major Theme 1). Credibility encompassed ideas of being prepared to lead as well as being recognized as a credible leader. All participants emphasized the importance of having a wide berth of education and knowledge to address the many responsibilities inherent to the superintendent position. All the participants also highlighted their advanced education and the deliberate career choices via the titles and positions held prior to their appointment as evidence of their preparation and enhance credibility to hold the position of superintendent. Several participants cited being accepted and trusted to do the work of the superintendent as paramount to their success in achieving the position.

However, these steps do not ensure immediate success, so the participants had to be courageous to continue on the path and establish relationships to assist in their leadership progression (Major Theme 1). The courage subtheme refers to having the courage to break the mold and do the unfamiliar confidently even when the course is uncomfortable, and the outcome may be unpredictable. Many of the participants shared they were either the first female, the first African American, or the first African American female to be appointed superintendent of their district. But instead of letting fear become a stumbling block, the participants embraced courage and built networks and connections to support and advance the ascension into leadership. All participants stressed the importance of connecting with others in leadership to aid their own leadership development and the importance of networking and having mentors as guides on their path to success. Denise offered this advice to aspiring African American female administrators:

Many of us start at a place where we end up in another place along that continuum. And what I want to say is, if an individual, a Black female is aspiring, or whatever is that aspiration, those aspirations are to stay on the path, stay focused. It's important for us as Black females to know we can do it. We need to do what is important and make sure that we're seen in these positions, so that we can inspire the future. That's important. The path might be scary, but that's okay, there will be someone there to help you to reach that goal or position you're aspiring to achieve. There will be people there along that path and I can give you evidence of it all day long. So don't let fear hold you back or make you think you cannot reach your goal of becoming a superintendent.

Research SQ2

How do African American female superintendents describe the strategies and experiences contributing to their perseverance in superintendence? Participants acknowledged the obstacles

that can hinder their leadership progression, such as gender and race. As the participants are not able to change their race or gender, they had to find other ways to overcome, such as having the internal fortitude and resilience to achieve, recognize the impact they leadership has on those who look up to them, and again create the necessary networks to undergird their efforts to lead successfully (Major Theme 2).

All participants acknowledged and shared some of setbacks encountered on their journey to superintendence. However, all participants also noted importance of not letting these incidents become detours to their leadership path. Many participants specifically used the term resilience to describe the driving force behind their ability to continue in their leadership positions. Participants described resilience as possessing internal fortitude to persist when met with impediments to success, such as race and gender, that cannot be changed. Rather than abandon their goal, the participants believed a better recourse was to work harder than their counterparts as "Superwomen" in order to gain access to the same opportunities.

In addition to resilience, participants also shared the pride felt witnessing the impact their presence in the superintendent position has on others as a significant motivator to continue in the role. All participants seemed to embrace their influence and expressed a sense of responsibility to continue to inspire others and by being visible and involved in their respective communities. The participants' involvement in their communities also helped to ingratiate the participants with parents, students, faculty and other stakeholders, garnering community support. Many participants noted the important role community support, including encouragers, faith, and support networks, played in achieving their goals as superintendent to boost morale, gain new perspective and motivate them to resist giving up during times of conflict. At the conclusion of her individual interview, Denise explained what motivates her to stay the course:

I have been given an opportunity that few are given in this superintendent role, and I don't take that lightly. And I think that's one of the things that inspires me to keep going is, I can. I'm in a position to make a difference in our children's lives, and in adult lives, and in our communities' lives, but especially our . . . our students' lives. I've been given an opportunity that very few people get, and so that's when I talk about staying focused. I must help everyone stay focused on teaching and learning because that's really why we're here. That is my core mission. And because of that, I know that I've got to stay the course, regardless of even going through all of what we're going through now, stay the course, lead, and impact.

Summary

Chapter Four included the research findings of this multiple case study. The chapter began with detailed descriptions of each of the 11 participants, all African American female superintendents. The focus of the study was to understand the experiences of African American women in their professional and personal journeys to become a superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Data analysis involved using the qualitative data analysis program, NVivo, to sort and arrange the data, then organize and code them into categories reflecting the research subquestion areas of success and perseverance. Further analysis of the categories produced two major themes, desire to succeed and determination to continue. Each major theme was discussed in the Results section with participant narratives included to support the findings, followed by a discussion of answers to the CRQ and two research SQs, using significant statements made by participants at each step in the analysis.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Following a summary of the study's findings and interpretation of these findings, implications for policy and practice are presented. Next, implications of the study are presented in relation to the theoretical and empirical literature as corresponding to the literature review in Chapter Two, followed by a discussion of the limitations and delimitations of the study. Recommendations for future research and a summary of the entire study conclude the chapter.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the limited research on the ascension of African American women to superintendence and develop an understanding of the factors and strategies these women deemed essential to their leadership progression. As part of the analysis, the findings are presented along with implications for policy and practice, and in association with theoretical and empirical implications relevant to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Limitations and delimitations and recommendations for future research are presented as well.

Interpretation of Findings

The discussion that follows includes the findings based on the participants' personal and professional experiences on their journey to the position of school superintendent. Data collected from individual interviews, a focus group, documents, and personal artifacts from 11 acting and retired superintendents were analyzed to produce two major themes: desire to succeed and

determination to continue. Major findings related to these themes are described in the succeeding sections.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Data collected in this study were used to answer the CRQ:

How do African American female superintendents describe their experiences in pursuit of achieving the school superintendent position?

Two research SQs were explored as well:

SQ1: How do African American female superintendents describe their path to success in achieving superintendence?

SQ2: How do African American female superintendents describe the strategies and experiences contributing to their perseverance in superintendence?

Study participants described their experiences as challenging due to the requirements of school leadership and acknowledged gender and race as obstacles that hinder leadership progression. However, participants also saw the impact their leadership has on others as significant motivation and agreed that success is achievable, provided one creates the necessary networks to undergird their efforts to successfully lead. The interpretations presented provide supporting explanation of these key findings.

Study participants agreed the position of school superintendent requires a leader who can connect and engage with the many members of their school district. All participants concurred the role of the superintendent, at its core, is to oversee the business of the school division, from the development of the budget, policies, and procedures to the operational components of transportation and nutrition services. However, the superintendent has a responsibility to ensure productive relationships and positive interactions with constituents and

stakeholders. As Brooke stated, "The goal is to create a well-rounded, caring, school division where our staff and members of our team feel cared for, our students and our parents feel cared for, in that environment." Participants also agreed people must be comfortable looking to them to lead regardless of the situation. This interpretation supports the research of Gewertz (2006), who cited factors commonly reported as important for women in the superintendence include the ability to maintain organizational relationships and responsiveness to parents and community groups. Correspondingly, additional research suggests female superintendents demonstrate a strong sense of efficacy and dedication to the care of children and use collaboration that is relational and consensus building (Alston, 2005).

Study participants possessed a strong desire to succeed as superintendent and believe they must follow a prescribed educational path and career to achieve their goal. All study participants highlighted their advanced education, a deliberate career path to gain experience in every level of education and leadership, and continued professional development as means to assure members of their districts they were more than qualified to be superintendent and provide the leadership necessary. Three participants even exceeded expectations by gaining additional experience working in the state department of education and attending legislative session pertaining to education. All participants agreed on the importance of having a wide berth of education and knowledge, as well as being able to set the vision and mission and galvanize the entire staff are critical leadership skills for working within the district to gain stakeholders' respect and confidence in their abilities to succeed as superintendent. Similar findings were reported in the AASA (2016) survey of superintendents when both male and female superintendents emphasized improving instruction and knowledge of the instructional process

and curriculum as significant factors for women's advancement and cited professional development as beneficial for advancing career opportunities for women.

Study participants agreed that networking and the ability to form relationships are essential to both leadership progression and sustaining continued success while in the leadership position. As emphasized by Cheryl, "Networking and having mentors in terms of modeling the way, and being supportive of advancing women in this field, in all administrative positions in education but especially the superintendent" is of particular importance. Across all data sources, the participants reiterated the importance of connecting with others in leadership to aid their own leadership development. A primary reason the participants gave for mentors was the ability to gain knowledge and leverage experiences that they never encountered or would not have access to observe, but nonetheless are an important part of being successful as a superintendent. Mentors and sponsors, formal and informal, can advise, guide, and model the way based on their wealth of experience. Mentors and sponsors may also provide necessary social and emotional support for the work of African American female superintendents be validating their experiences and providing advice for ways to navigate impediments as they arise. This interpretation supports research indicating sponsors and mentors can be powerful tools to assist African American women in understanding the rules of the organizations and how to appropriately leverage them for success (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Thomas, 2020).

Study participants agreed that access to proper role models is important for all aspiring educational administrators and for inspiring community members. Having proper role models is important for all aspiring educational administrators. Role models and representations of women of color in the senior ranks of educational administration are difficult to find, as the environment and culture is not one that is open, collaborative, and supportive to

their perspectives and needs (Calderone et al., 2020; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000).

However, as school populations have become more diverse, representation matters to students

and families as they seek a connection with leadership. Many of the participants expressed the

pride they feel as an African American female superintendent in the communities they serve.

Many of the participants lead districts that are predominantly African American and can readily

see the impact their presence has on the students and families to see someone that looks like

them at the helm of the district. All participants agreed that seeing themselves reflected in the

children they serve as a strong motivation to succeed beyond expectations and inspire future

leaders in the same way they wanted to be inspired by mentors that looked like them. This

interpretation supports research completed by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) that suggests

changing demographics and increased diversity in public schools necessitates a leader that

reflects the community and has enhanced human relation skills to have a positive impact in the

community.

Study participants agreed that race, gender, and other identity markers impact

women holding or pursuing leadership positions in educational administrations. All

participants were able to share examples of perceived sexist and/or racist encounters they

believed hindered their leadership progression. Brooke expressed this sentiment when she stated,

"Being a woman and Black in Virginia and the United States cause cognitive dissonance in

others," and Cheryl and Helen concurred that others' perceptions of them held them back

because people may feel a woman, more specifically an African American woman, should not be

in the position. As such, African American women must endure and overcome both overt and

covert forms of discrimination and stereotyping that on their leadership journey. Olivia and

Cheryl both stated they were among the final candidates for superintendent at least three times

before they were ultimately appointed, but each time lost the position to a White male candidate with less experience or educational expertise. Both participants also recalled being explicitly told by the hiring committees they did fit the district's perception of leadership or would not be accepted by the community and stakeholders as the face of the district. These are examples of both racial and gender bias, wherein the expectation that the superintendent is White and male negatively impacts the ability of others to be fairly evaluated or considered for advancement to this leadership position. This interpretation is supported by research that implies racial and gender bias can lead to White men being ultimately selected over women to be leaders due to the existing leadership structures with men comprising most senior leadership roles (Cryss Brunner & Kim, 2009), and that women in leadership positions must still consider how they are perceived in response to the numerous stereotypes—gendered, racial, ethnic, class—placed upon them by their peers in the profession (Chase & Martin, 2019).

Study participants agreed that African American female superintendents are hired to be change agents and are more often appointed to school districts that are underperforming or need of an overhaul. Several participants shared the perception that they were not selected to lead school districts that were excelling or districts to be celebrated; rather, as Georgia stated, "We are sent to places that need to be fixed." As such, the participants described they must navigate the delicate dance between connecting with and being accepted by the community with the demands to upset the status quo to effect change and make dramatic improvements to the system. Participants stated they had to work harder and smarter, while accepting the stress that comes with performing additional work to be successful in the position and not have their race or gender used as reasons they are not able to meet the goals. As shared by Erika,

I came in with the mentality of being a change agent. My only focus was the outcome, in

that I'm going to turn that school around and prove all these things that are written about

for years: that the color of your skin doesn't have anything to do whatsoever with your

ability to achieve.

This interpretation is supported by research indicating that African American female

superintendents are hired disproportionately in urban school districts that are poorly maintained

and managed and have high minority population areas (Alston, 1999; Doughty, 1980; Jackson,

1999; Moody, 1983; Robinson et al., 2017). As such, female superintendents of color describe

feeling the additional burden of having to prove themselves by achieving these additional

outcomes (Cryss Brunner & Kim, 2010).

Study participants agreed that having a supportive family and belief system helps

build the resilience necessary to pursue and continue in superintendent position. All

participants shared stories demonstrating the ways their family and friends provided vital support

during their leadership journey. Examples included spouses and significant others providing

financial resources and sacrificing family time to further the participants' pursuit of advanced

degrees, as voiced by Maxine: "You know your family sacrifices for you when you're doing this

type of work because you're taking away your time from them, you're using money and

resources, your mind's always in some form of lockdown." Family and friends as provide

emotional support needed to bounce back when participants experienced setbacks or obstacles to

their leadership progression. Many participants also expressed a belief in God or other higher

power as providing the sustenance to stay on their chosen path of educational leadership and are

comforted when they find this belief reflected in the communities they serve. This interpretation

supports research indicating many African American female superintendents refer to their pursuit

of the position as adherence to a higher calling to lead others, and they carry this belief in their

leadership practices in their districts and communities (Alston, 2005).

Implications for Policy and Practice

In accordance with the interpretations outlined in this study, the following implications

for policy and implications for practice should be considered in support of African American

women seeking advancement to the position of school superintendent. The implications for

policy suggest improvement in the preparational tools and resources made available to African

American women pursuing leadership roles. The implications for practice suggest steps African

American women may consider when advocating for themselves and creating supports that will

help them be successful in the superintendent position.

Implications for Policy

These implications for policy are suggested in relation to policies, procedures, and

regulations that educational leadership programs, school districts, and professional associations

may consider in helping African American women seeking advancement. As school district

populations become more diverse, school leaders should be more representative of the

populations served. Change to district policies and procedures, as well as professional

development programs, to support the needs of African American women may increase their

representation in school superintendent position.

Higher education leadership programs should include topics related to division-level

leadership, networking, fiscal management, and operations, and should be widely available

to support women interested in pursuing superintendence. The AASA (2016) study indicated

that school boards place great emphasis on budgetary and financial decisions in conjunction with

instructional abilities as key hiring criteria. However, 82% of female superintendents surveyed

by AASA reported impressions that their school boards did not view them as strong managers, and 76% of female superintendents reported their school boards did not view them as fiscally competent (AASA, 2016). Additionally, 61% of female superintendents reported feeling that a glass ceiling exists in school management as a barrier to their promotion (AASA, 2016). The participants in this study gained financial and operational knowledge by thinking outside the box and taking on a variety of administrative roles in the central office and gleaning these valuable experiences over time. In contrast to this indirect route, women seeking superintendence would be better served by formal programs that provide specific instruction in division-level leadership, networking, fiscal management, and operations so they gain these skills and are better able to demonstrate these leadership capabilities once they reach the superintendent position.

School districts and professional associations should develop structured mentoring programs to support African American women that express interest in leadership and the superintendency. A common concern voiced by several participants was the lack of mentorship for superintendents currently in the role to help them navigate the course. Lack of mentorship was also mentioned as an obstacle to advancement in their educational careers. Peters (2012) affirmed the critical level of support that can be provided by sponsors and mentors is often overlooked and undersupplied for female leaders. Superintendents, both male and female, should share their experiences and lessons from their career paths with African American females seeking and already serving in the superintendent position, and school districts and professional associations can facilitate the formalization of these sponsoring and mentorship experiences. Sponsors and mentors can assist African American women in understanding the rules of the organizations and how to appropriately leverage them for success (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Thomas, 2020).

School districts should develop training opportunities to expand the skills of African American women who have expressed an interest in pursuing leadership roles. Networking, relationship building, and gaining division-level leadership roles are all important components to the success of African American women seeking to one day lead a school district as a superintendent. All participants in this study spoke about the knowledge and skills gained by taking on these leadership roles. However, many participants also shared they were not able to become superintendents in their home districts and were appointed to serve elsewhere. School districts would benefit from "building their own" and investing in the leadership development of African American women presently in their ranks. Actions such as supporting their pursuit of advanced degrees, professional development, and providing opportunities for these women to demonstrate their leadership capabilities will benefit the school district creating internal candidates that can couple the acquired skills with first-hand knowledge and understanding of their home community to succeed as future leaders of the district.

School districts and professional associations should develop intentional, structured programs for school boards and community groups to connect with African American female superintendents to normalize community outreach and expand these groups' acceptance and understanding of their leadership. Several study participants shared their perception that African American female superintendents are appointed to communities in crisis and in need of course correction. This sentiment is corroborated by research that indicates female superintendents of color are twice as likely as White female superintendents to report feeling they were hired as change agents brought in to lead reform efforts (Gewertz, 2006; Robinson et al., 2017). This mandate to "fix" the problems that exist in the district immediately creates a barrier to success because it requires changing the existing mindset, culture, and practices, which

can lead to disconnect with the community and stakeholders. This transformative work also adds the burden of African American superintendents having to prove themselves by achieving these additional outcomes (Cryss Brunner & Kim, 2010). School districts and professional organizations would benefit from establishing programs that highlight the contributions and achievements of the superintendents and share this information with school boards and the community. The programs should pay particular attention to accomplishments not often associated with African American female administrators, such as fiscal management, facilities, and maintenance, to highlight their diverse skill set and potential to succeed in leadership. These programs should also highlight community contributions and personal connections to further endear these superintendents to their constituents.

Implications for Practice

These implications for practice are suggestions of steps that active and aspiring African American superintendents may want to consider when looking for ways to bolster their work to be successful in this role.

African American females interested in pursuing superintendence should access professional opportunities to cultivate professional networks to facilitate sponsorship and access to other opportunities. The vital role that networking and relationship building play in career advancement was mentioned several times throughout this study. However, many participants expressed initial apprehension connecting with networks outside of their familiarity because, as Cheryl described, "Other people's perception of you can hold you back from advancing"; in addition to the fear of being out of place as the only African American present. While there may be differences in how African American leaders are approached when compared to White leaders, to reach their career goals African American female superintendents

may need to intentionally diversify their networks to enable exposure to colleagues and connections they traditionally do not observe or access, such as members of the state legislature or department of education, congressional lobbyists, heads of industry, and the like. These new networks may allow their careers to advance in a different manner than if they continued the same trajectory or continued to interact with the same groups. Additionally, exposure to these other groups may change the members' perceptions of African American women as they work toward common goals. African American women may not be able to change that they are the only person of color at the table, but they may be able to do the work internally to diversify their work settings and committee membership to aid their professional growth. Programs such as the AASA Aspiring Superintendents Academy® for Female Leaders may serve as a foundation for development of networks and sponsorship, but a specific focus on specifically recruiting and preparing African American women to lead is warranted.

Because of the intersectional realities faced by African American women, more established African American leaders must become bridges of support for others, in the form of mentors and sponsors. Research has shown that due to their intersectionality, African American female leaders are often excluded from informal networks and doubly devalued due to both race and gender (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Peters, 2012). Long-tenured African American superintendents and senior level administrators can share their experiences with aspiring administrators and be the bridge to help them advance to the next level. African American mentors and sponsors can mirror the intersectional experiences of the African American women as leaders when they need to validate their experiences of gender and/or racial oppression as real and true (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). These sponsors and mentors can also assist African American women in understanding microaggressions, combating negative stereotypes and

assisting African American women in leveling the playing field by applying lessons learned to avoid potential professional landmines (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gaetane et al., 2009). Building a network of trusted confidants that bring out their best can instill confidence and support African American women on their leadership journey.

African American females should embrace their true authentic selves and lead from a place of confidence, and serve as a role model for other women seeking the superintendence. While it is true the African American female's route to leadership is different, it is important for African American females to know they can and will succeed. Furthermore, African American women must make sure they are seen in these positions given their power to inspire future leaders and be a role model for females that look like them. Confidence inspires more confidence and assures others that the leader knows the way and can lead the way. This starts with African American women believing in their ability to have the superintendence and be comfortable in their own skin to project confidence and inspire. Confidence also requires being one's true, authentic self.

African American female leaders have expressed they did not think they would be promoted if they had natural hairstyles. However, with recent legislation such as the expansion of Virginia's Human Rights Act to include hair, specifically hair and hairstyles typically associated with African Americans, and added protections for characteristics and attributes traditionally associated with race, including hair texture, hair type, and hairstyles such as braids, locks, and twists, some of the fears experienced by African American women pursuing leadership roles may be alleviated (Janisch, 2020; Joy Media Collective, 2021). Perhaps as more African American women persist in achieving leadership positions as their true selves, gains can be made to see the African American female as legitimate, accepted, and preferred, to then serve

as a model for future generations of African American women to forge healthier pathways for advancement and leadership development.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The findings from this study of the experiences of African American females during the ascent to the superintendent position served to corroborate much of the literature presented in Chapter Two. Theoretical frameworks including CRT, Black feminist standpoint theory, and sociocultural learning theory address the struggles of African American women, specifically regarding racism, sexism, microaggressions, and the status of outsider (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Research by Villalpando and Bernal (2002) and Delgado and Stefancic (2001) on CRT illustrates how laws and policies that were assumed to be race neutral, instead can be implemented in ways that continue to perpetuate racial oppression when ideals such as colorblindness and meritocracy can be used to systematically disadvantage African Americans while serving to advantage their White peers.

Furthermore, avoiding the issue of race allows individuals in power to acknowledge only overt, egregious racial maltreatments while other types of covert actions are avoided, neglected, or excused (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). An example such covert actions is evident in the traditional educational administration curriculum's skew toward the perspectives of Caucasian men due to their dominance in educational administration (Calderone et al., 2020; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Lemasters & Roach, 2012). This perspective does not resonate African American women and representation of African American females in senior educational administrative positions are difficult to find as the preparatory programs, environment and culture is not one supportive to their perspectives and needs (Calderone et al., 2020; Cryss Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Many study participants noted the path of the African American

female to the superintendent position is different from that experienced by White males and females due to advantages their race and gender afford them. Several participants reported frustration at interviewing for the superintendent multiple times, only to be passed over for promotion and witness the appointment of another White male to the position. Erika voiced this frustration in her individual interview:

> I have been passed over at least once when I thought that I should have gotten that position. A major obstacle has been the mentality that only men can lead an organization. But not only is it only men can lead an organization, but also Whites also have an edge over Blacks. So, I'm looking at it as well, I already have two strikes against me: I'm not going to change the color of my skin, nor will I change my sex to do this job.

During the focus group interview, Maxine also expressed frustration at the perceived level playing that still skews toward White males:

> I certainly feel like the "isms" play a part . . . sexism, racism . . . in my everyday walk. Even though I was home grown, and everyone can come in my office and see my life on the walls and my accomplishments, it didn't necessarily make that a "no question she'll be the one." If anything, it was proving yourself above and beyond what you've already demonstrated. There were no considerations of the history, it was an "even playing field for all the candidates," which I appreciate, but at the same time, you wonder would another candidate of a different sex or race have had to feel like "I must dot every i and cross every t" to the level that I did.

To overcome these obstacles of race and gender, African American females have had to work harder to prove their competency and credibility to lead, such as making sure they held leadership positions at every educational level and possess a terminal degree even when their

White peers are promoted without these credentials. Additionally, the participants had to demonstrate resilience to continue when success was not achieved on the first or second attempt.

Similar to CRT, Collins's (1990, 1998, 2000, 2002) research on Black feminism suggests African American females are marginalized and, while they have been superficially included in dominant spaces, remain outsiders due to their lack of voice and agency within the group. To counter this, Black feminist standpoint theory stresses the importance of African American women valuing, defining, and validating themselves to counter the negative images that are created outside of her. Study participants shared many examples of having to assert their presence and make their voices heard in school board meetings or interacting with community members who assume the superintendent is a White male. Olivia spoke about making school board members speak to her, stepping in front of them to make sure they acknowledge her presence, and shaking their hands to illustrate her confidence and affirm her status as the face of the district. Other participants spoke about the importance of building their own relationships with stakeholders in the community, building a network of allies that could advocate for them and on their behalf as well. These actions demonstrate the steps participants took to make sure their own voices were clearly heard and acknowledged when they may have otherwise been ignored due to negative assumptions based on their race or gender.

The building of networks also has a connection with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theories of imitative learning and collaborative learning. According to Vygotsky's theory, cultural tools can be passed from one individual to another by imitative learning when one person tries to copy the behaviors of another and through collaborative learning when a group of peers strive to understand each other by working together to learn a specific skill (Gallagher, 1999). Study participants consistently stressed the vital role that mentors and

sponsors play in their leadership journey. The mentors and sponsors were important providers of guidance, advice and, at times, emotional support as the participants were able to apply lessons learned from their mentor's experiences and avoid potential pitfalls and setbacks to their ascent. Forming a diverse network of mentors and sponsor also gave the participants access to collaborate with peers from different areas and gain new and contrasting perspectives in areas not traditionally available to African American females, such as budget development, legislative assemblies, and policy-making.

Empirical literature on tempered radicalism, servant leadership, transformational leadership, intersectional perspectives, and the SBW persona describe the tools and strategies African American females have used to persist in their leadership journey. Meyerson and Scully (1995) described tempered radicalism as a strategy where individuals use their leverage and knowledge of the organization to make change on issues they care about, but not so much change that they impair their effectiveness. Study participants often referred to themselves as change agents appointed to fix school districts in crisis or struggling to meet required standards of achievement. As African American women attempt these changes, they take on the dual challenges that race and gender pose to their success as constituents resist their efforts. To surmount these challenges, some of the participants tapped into their insider status as home-grown candidates while others utilized their strong ties and relationship-building in their communities to support their efforts while they worked to impact change. When major gains were achieved, such as gaining accreditation for schools or improving student graduation rates, the participants celebrated these wins with the entire community, reaffirming their position as a contributing member, committed to improving conditions in the district. As a result, necessary

changes were realized, and perceptions of the participants' effectiveness increased correspondingly.

Alston (2005) described African American female superintendents as the contemporary model of the archetypal servant leader, as they consciously choose to first serve others in their quest of to provide leadership. Alston (2005) also posited female superintendents demonstrate a strong sense of efficacy and dedication to the care of children and use collaboration that is relational and consensus building. All study participants professed love for children and a belief in the power of education to change the lives of children as major motivations for initially choosing education as their career path and for propelling them to pursue senior leadership positions. Many of participants described their profession as either a calling from God or a gift from God and saw service to others as their life's mission which, in turn, shaped the leadership practices employed in the school districts they lead. For this study, servant leadership accurately described how the participants' respect and love for others directed their decision-making and actions taken to achieve organizational goals.

Transformational leaders are skilled in inspiring their teams by encouraging participation and recognizing all points of view (Gupton & Slick, 1996). Transformational leadership also places high value on mentoring and establishing connections between people. One participant, Georgia, specifically described her work as transformational with the goal of building future leaders and growing capacity:

> In the end, to me, it's about being transformational. Once you've got the experience, the goal is to be transformational. It's our job to make a difference. When we're working with people, you're transforming . . . you don't want them to be the same in the end under your leadership as they were when they began.

Study participants also discussed the high value and trust they placed on members of their teams and saw their teams as vital components to their success in the superintendent position. Maxine and Denise talked about utilizing the strengths of their team members in matters pertaining to human resources, facilities, and other areas to reach shared organizational goals, as well as seeking their counsel regarding the impact the leadership positions could have on students, families, and the community. These actions to recognize and utilize the strengths of those in the organization to reach shared organizational goals context is supported by the literature (Eagly et al., 2003; J. L. Martin et al., 2018).

Servant and transformational leadership styles also help African American women counter the negative impacts of intersectionality. Regarding intersectionality, African American women in leadership positions describe their experiences of gendered racism as "double jeopardy" due to the intersection of both gender and racial stereotypes and the oppressive impact on their leadership progression (Gaetane et al., 2009), reducing their access to leadership positions and creating more ambivalence concerning their ability to lead successfully (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). However, current research also suggests African American women were able transcend these stereotypes by utilizing leadership styles based in inclusivity, consensus building, and collaboration, such as servant and transformational leadership. Also, because of the intersectional realities faced by African American women, as leaders these women become bridges of support for others (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The bridges of support described by Davis and Maldonado (2015) were observed during the focus group interview session as participants affirmed each other's experiences, offered support and encouragement, and retired superintendents shared lessons learned with newer superintendents avoid the same pitfalls. The

participants also offered to stay in touch with one another to sustain the connections formed during the session, extending the bridge to further each other's leadership journeys.

Finally, data from the study support researchers' understanding that African American female superintendents accept the SBW persona as a means of coping with the demands of the superintendent position. Woods-Giscombé (2010) coined the term "strong Black woman," which incorporates the need for the SBW to manifest strength, suppress emotion, resist being vulnerable and/or dependent, and possess a strong drive to succeed and an obligation to help others (Parks, 2010). Current study participants shared that their experiences taught them they must manage their behaviors, inwardly and outwardly, to manage how they are perceived as effective leaders. Participants also acknowledged consciously working to ensure others only see them as composed, competent, stable leaders, even "while juggling competing responsibilities of being a mother, wife, with the full responsibility of being the CEO in our school" as expressed by Brooke.

Study participants also discussed how the perception of strength differs for men versus women, stating their belief that men do not have same need to prove themselves whereas women will overextend to the detriment of their selves. As expressed by Frances,

Sometimes we have to make sure that we take off our Superwoman cape and put our oxygen mask on first, so that we can then continue in this important role of school leadership. But the question is if we're going to be seen as weak or are going to be seen as strong, because we're women.

As African American women, they must determine whether they will adhere to the presumed gender and racial stereotypes of the SBW to be viewed as an effective leader, or be their authentic, true selves and accept questions about their leadership due to perceived vulnerabilities.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations of this study were primarily the selection of participants and the setting. The selection of participants was intentionally limited to African American female superintendents. While the experiences of female superintendents have implications for all female educational leaders, the focus of this study was to capture the experiences of African American female superintendents to add to enhance the limited literature that exists for this group. The setting was limited to public school district in the Commonwealth of Virginia due to the rising number of acting and retired superintendents that served in this state.

There were three primary limitations to this study, all connected to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that was occurred during this study. First, the pandemic significantly impacted the ability of school systems to operate as normal, as school superintendents the study participants were forced to focus considerable time working to safeguard the health and safety of students and school staff. As the needs of their district took priority, individual interviews were pushed back, rescheduled and at times cancelled, extending the overall time taken to complete data collection.

Second, during this time, several participants retired or transitioned from the superintendent position. Not all of the original participants could be located, resulting in additional searches to identify and locate new participants that met the original requirements and were willing to participate in the study, which therefore extended the overall timeframe of the study. Although the group was diversified to include acting and retired superintendents from both urban and rural districts and possessing a wide berth of professional experience in the role, the small number of participants may limit the transferability of research findings.

Finally, physical distancing restraints of the pandemic necessitated a shift to virtual interviews conducted using the ZOOM virtual platform. Data collection during individual interviews and focus groups was limited to the scope of the camera and screen and did not allow for fine observation of participant body language during individual interviews or meaningful interaction among participants during the group interview. Researcher bias was a consideration as the collected data was reviewed and analyzed. To minimize bias and maintain objectivity, observations and notes from the interviews were kept in a separate journal to prevent influence and bracketing was utilized to ensure the voices of the participants were separated from the researcher. Direct quotes from the participants were also used to support the evidence provided by the participants.

<div align="center">**Recommendations for Future Research**</div>

The findings discussed in this chapter suggest several opportunities for future research regarding the experiences of African American in their leadership progression to the superintendent position and strategies that promote persistence. First, limitations in the setting and number of study participants suggest expanding the study to a larger size and wider scope. Conducting the same study with a larger number of participants and wider geographic area beyond Virginia could provide greater comparison between acting and retired superintendents as well as identify additional factors influencing the success and persistence of African American women pursuing superintendence.

Second, a study identifying common character traits and leadership styles of successful African American female superintendents is suggested as beneficial to helping future administrators navigate their own professional development. Administration and supervision preparatory programs and professional associations could also use data from such a study to

develop formal mentorship programs for aspiring female administrators. Furthermore, a study of superintendent academies and other professional development opportunities for acting superintendents is suggested. Several study participants discussed their experiences attending leadership development programs such as the Broad Superintendent Academy, a 10-month program designed to prepare senior leaders to lead public school systems and Oxford University's Women's Leadership Development Programme, a 6-week program designed to help women address gender bias and other barriers to leadership progression. A common complaint raised by the participants was these programs' focus on leadership development was too narrow and did not include components required to build the business acumen for topics such budget experience and fiscal resource management that school boards consider critical components of superintendent success (Gewertz, 2006). A study of these programs can lead to recommendations for improvement that can further enhance the professional development of acting superintendents.

Finally, findings from this study suggest further research comparing the experiences of African American female superintendents to the experiences of White female superintendents in pursuit of superintendence. A mixed methods study including surveys and individual interviews or a multiple participant phenomenological study may provide additional insight into the differing experiences of female superintendents. Data from the 2016 AASA survey of superintendents, a study that documents demographics, background, and experiences of school superintendents, indicated the majority of African American women do not obtain superintendencies as quickly as do their White counterparts, with only 56% of African American females hired within the first year of actively seeking a superintendency, compared to more than 70% of White females. Furthermore, 25% of African American females reported waiting 5 or

more years to obtain a superintendency, compared to only 8% of Caucasian females (AASA, 2016). The intersection of gender and race may explain why White males are selected over African American females, but with gender removed as a variable, a deeper examination of difference in the career advancement of White females versus African American females would be helpful in identifying other barriers to African American females' leadership progression.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The participants included 11 African American female superintendents, seven currently serving and four retired practitioners, that all shared personal and professional experiences to describe how, as African American females, they were able to persevere and succeed in achieving the position of school superintendent. The central research question, "How do African American female superintendents describe their experiences in pursuit of achieving the school superintendent position?" was designed to explore the lived experiences of these African American women and understand the leadership experiences that contribute to the success of African American female school superintendents.

Data collected from individual interviews, a focus group, and personal artifacts from the 11 superintendents were analyzed to produce two major themes: desire to succeed and determination to continue. Findings from this study support previous theoretical research on CRT, Black feminist standpoint theory, and sociocultural learning theory and empirical research on tempered radicalism, transformational leadership, and intersectional perspectives to address the struggles of African American women to describe the tools and strategies used to persist in their leadership journey. Study participants described their experiences as challenging and

acknowledged gender and race as obstacles to their leadership progression, but a significant motivator for to persist was the impact their leadership has on others.

Additionally, all agreed that success is achievable, provided there are supportive professional and personal networks in place to undergird their efforts to lead. Considering these findings, several implications for policy and implications for practice should be contemplated in support of African American women seeking advancement to the position of school superintendent. First, professional associations should develop structured mentoring programs to support African American women that express interest in leadership and the superintendency. Additionally, African American females interested in pursuing superintendence should access professional opportunities to cultivate professional networks to facilitate sponsorship and access to other opportunities. Also, because of the intersectional realities faced by African American women, more established African American leaders must become bridges of support for others, bridges in the form of mentors and sponsors.

Educators often say it takes a whole village to raise a child, meaning the entire community must provide for and interact positively with children to ensure a safe and healthy environment for them to grow and prosper. Respectively, this study suggests it also takes a whole village to support educational leadership, meaning African American females are best positioned to succeed in their pursuit of superintendence in environments with encouraging mentors and sponsors, supportive networks and teammates and accepting community all invested in their success.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

November 4, 2020

Kimberly Ferguson

Kenneth Tierce

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY20-21-101 A Multiple Case Study Examining the Success and Persistence of

African American Female Superintendents

Dear Kimberly Ferguson, Kenneth Tierce:

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the date of the IRB meeting at which the protocol was approved: November 4, 2020. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make modifications in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update submission to the IRB. These submissions can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Potential Participant,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts within the Commonwealth of Virginia, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, African American, identify as female and serve (or have served) as a K-12 school district superintendent in Virginia. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an audio and video-recorded Zoom interview and focus group, review their interview and focus group transcripts, and review participant-provided personal documents with the researcher. Transcripts will be emailed to participants within 48 hours following the interview and focus group for member checks. The transcripts should be emailed back to the researcher within 48 hours of receipt. It should take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete the interview, approximately 10 minutes to review the documents, up to 60 minutes to complete the focus group, and approximately 30 minutes each to review the transcripts. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in all documents to maintain privacy and insure confidentiality.

In order to participate, please contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ to schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me by email prior to the interview.

Thank you for your consideration and possible willingness to participate. Please email or call me

with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Ferguson

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project: A Multiple Case Study Examining the Success and Persistence of

African American Female Superintendents

Principal Investigator: Kimberly Ferguson, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, African American, identify as female, and serve (or have served) as a K-12 school district superintendent in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Virginia serves as the location of the study due to the increase in the number of African American females to successfully achieve superintendency over the last decade. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in an audio and video-recorded Zoom interview. The interview should take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete.

2. Provide and review with the researcher any documents relating to your preparation to become a school superintendent and records of success while in the position such as:

     a. Resumes

     b. Portfolios

     c. Training Records

     d. Certificates

     e. Awards and Recognitions

This should take approximately 10 minutes to complete and will take place immediately after the Zoom interview.

3. Review your interview transcript for accuracy. The transcript will be emailed to you within 48 hours of the interview and should take approximately 30 minutes to review. The transcript should be returned to the researcher within 48 hours of receipt.

4. Participate in an audio and video-recorded Zoom focus group. The focus group should take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

5. Review your focus group transcript for accuracy. The transcript will be emailed to you within 48 hours of the focus group and should take approximately 30 minutes to review. The transcript should be returned to the researcher within 48 hours of receipt.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include understanding the factors influencing the success of African American women reaching the superintendent position. Understanding the path to success may influence more African American women to pursue superintendent positions and increase diversity in school leadership positions.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports 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. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

• Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

• Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked safe. The data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all physical records will be shredded.

• The interview and focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and faculty sponsor will have access to these recordings.

• Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether 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.

What should you do if you decide 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.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Kimberly Ferguson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ and/or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Kenneth Tierce, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

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

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

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

APPENDIX D: TWO COLUMN MEMOING

Sample Two Column Memoing – Frances

Observations and Facts	Reflections	*Possible Themes*
Started as a teacher; 34 total years as an educator	long career, good understanding of education	*Preparation, knowledge, credibility*
Served 5 years as assistant superintendent	opportunity to observe superintendent	*Preparation, mentor*
Supervisor encouraged her to apply for supervisory role	Spark interest in superintendence? Confidence booster?	*Mentor, sponsor, encouragement*
Superintendent in another state before moving to Virginia	How does experience in Virginia compare to other state?	*Not directly applicable to this study*
First job in predominantly African American community	New experience, wants to succeed, be a role model	*Trailblazer, visibility*
Important to her to be advocate for children	Commitment	*Impact, influence*
District is diverse: 8,000 students segregated by zip codes, 25% poverty and underperforming	Challenging district to oversee	*Challenges*
Experiences as teacher's assistant, teacher of teacher, character education programs, partnership with schools overseas	Early influences, increasing responsibilities	*Inspiration, encouragement, mentoring*
Superintendent exposed her to collective bargaining sessions with unions, legislative sessions	Supervisor prepared her to take the reins	*Mentor, sponsor, encouragement*
Attributes for success: self-reflection, build good team, mentor others to bring them along	Self-awareness, self-confidence, not afraid to support others	*Confidence, team building*
Obstacles: Virginia is in Bible-belt, gender bias, pay equity in hiring, achievement gaps between White and African American students	Seems geared toward gender and race; Bible-belt/southern state – would conditions be different in northern states?	*Gender, equity*
Strategies: team building, empower others, promote leaders	Building future leaders, like how her supervisors did for her	*Mentor, sponsor, encouragement*
Motivation: students, families	Connection to community	*Community relations, support*
Wondered if natural hair would be impediment to leadership ascent	Concerned about appearance, acceptance	*Race and gender, obstacle*
Advice: believe in self, get trusted network, find someone you admire and connect with them	Said "don't take no for an answer" - assertive	*Confidence, networks, determination*

APPENDIX E: AUDIT TRAIL

Sample Audit Trail (Maxine)

Date	Event	Notes
June 28, 2021	Emailed 6th round of email invitations to participate in the study	Received IRB approval November 2020 and continued to solicit participants from December 2020 through August 2021
June 28, 2021	Maxine responded (via phone call) to confirm willingness to participate; scheduled interview date	
June 28, 2021	Received signed consent form	Maxine returned via email
June 30, 2021	Conducted interview virtually via ZOOM virtual meeting platform	
July 1-2, 2021	Read interview transcript provided by ZOOM and manually correct for errors	Watched and listed to video while reviewing transcript to correct errors
July 1, 2021	Received Maxine's resume via email	
July 2, 2021	Sent Maxine copy of video and corrected transcripts to	Member-check to review for accuracy
July 3, 2021	Received hard copies of Maxine's personal artifacts via postal mail	Artifacts included • Resume /curriculum vitae • "First 100 Days" plan presented to school board upon appointment position • Leadership philosophy document • Community member (parents, faculty, staff) character testimonials
July 5, 2021	Contacted Maxine to confirm accuracy of transcript	
July 5, 2021	Reviewed school district website	Sought to confirm details provided by Maxine during interview and get additional information to compare with data collected on other participant school districts
July 6, 2021	Maxine emailed names and contact information for potential study participants	Snowball sampling employed to gain more participants
July 6-10, 2021	Began coding of transcript and personal artifacts	Highlighted significant statements, uploaded to NVivo software, and added nodes, reviewed journal for additional notations of codes, categories and themes
July 15, 2021	Sent Maxine invitation to participate in focus group interview	

July 19, 2021	Maxine accepted invitation to participate in focus group interview	
August 2, 2021	Conducted focus group interview virtually via ZOOM	
August 3-4, 2021	Read interview transcript provided by ZOOM and manually corrected errors	Watched and listed to video while reviewing transcript to correct errors
August 5, 2021	Sent focus group members copies of transcripts to review for accuracy	
August 7-10, 2021	Began coding of focus group interview transcript	Highlighted significant statements, uploaded to NVivo software and added nodes, reviewed journal for additional notations of codes, categories and themes

APPENDIX F: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me about yourself and the school district you lead.

2. How many years have you been in this superintendent position?

3. Please describe your career path prior to assuming the superintendent position.

4. What previous experiences do you believe prepared you for leadership and superintendence?

5. What factors do you attribute to your success in achieving this leadership post?

6. What obstacles have you encountered while moving toward your current leadership position?

7. What obstacles are you currently facing in your present leadership position?

8. What strategies do you draw on to overcome obstacles?

9. What motivates you to persist in this leadership role?

10. What other information would you like share about your leadership experience?

APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What factors do you think are significant to African American women's advancement into educational leadership positions?

2. What do you believe is the role of the superintendent in the school district?

3. How have you prepared yourself to succeed in the school superintendent role?

4. What, if any, impact do you believe your race has had on your ability to succeed in this role?

5. What, if any, impact do you believe your gender has had on your ability to succeed in this role?

6. What advice would you provide to African American women seeking the superintendence?

APPENDIX H: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW/FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT

Introduction:

Hello and welcome to our interview/focus group session. I appreciate your willingness to meet with me. The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of African American women in their ascent to the position of superintendent in school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The questions of the interview/focus group will focus on your experiences as you worked to pursue the superintendent position, the strategies you used to be successful in this pursuit as well as persevere in this leadership role. If you have any documents that pertain to your preparation to become a school district superintendent, you can share those during the interview if applicable or after we are finished.

I will be audio taping/videotaping the interview sessions so that I can focus on what you are saying and take notes during the discussions. I will transcribe your comments at a later date and provide copies for your review to ensure accuracy when I write the report. In the report pseudonyms will be used to assure anonymity.

Questions:

Following the introduction, the individual interview and/or focus group questions will be asked. The questions to be asked are included in Appendices E and F. Any additional questions that arise will be noted.

Conclusion:

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. I appreciate your time and willingness to

share your experiences. You will receive a copy of the final report upon completion of this study.

Please feel free to contact me if you have additional information to share, or questions or

concerns regarding the study.

APPENDIX I: PRELIMINARY CODE LIST

NVIVO Coding Table

Code	Reference Counts
Success	
Change agent	8
Different route	5
Leadership	5
Trailblazer	21
Visibility	8
Mentor	14
Networking	39
Sponsor	6
Career path	76
Education	19
Experience	15
Professional development	6
Work ethic	7
Persistence	
Encouragers and supporters	8
Faith	5
Networking	19
Gender	17
Race	7
Internal fortitude	16
Servanthood	1
Superwoman	7
Making a difference	5
Visibility	6
Total	**361**

APPENDIX J: CODE TO CLUSTER LIST

Pathway to Success	Strategies to Persist
Courageous Leadership • Change agent • Different route • Leadership • Trailblazer • Visibility	Build Teams • Encouragers and supporters • Faith • Networking
Network Support • Mentors • Networking • Sponsors	Overcome Intersectionality • Gender • Race
Preparation • Career path • Education • Experience • Professional development • Work ethic	Resilience • Internal fortitude • Servanthood • Superwoman
	Value/Impact • Making a difference • Visibility

APPENDIX K: CODE CLUSTER TO THEME

Theme: Desire to Succeed

Subtheme	Code (Counts)
Credibility	Career Path (76)
	Education (19)
	Experience (21)
	Work ethic (7)
Courage	Trailblazer (21)
	Change agent (8)
	Different route (5)
	Leadership (5)
Relationships	Networking (39)
	Mentors (14)
	Sponsors (6)

Theme: Determination to Continue

Subtheme	Code (Counts)
Resilience	Internal fortitude (16)
	Superwoman (7)
Impact	Making a difference (50)
	Visibility (8)
Community Support	Encouragers (8)
	Faith (5)
	Networks (19)

APPENDIX L: PROCEDURES

- Secure IRB approval for the study
- Contact school district superintendents with invitation to participate and to schedule an interview
- School superintendents will be assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes
- Collect demographic information such as education, prior educational experience, length of service as superintendent and district information, using questionnaire distributed prior to interview
- Conduct individual interviews and document collection
    - Individual interviews will be videotaped with participant's permission and transcribed
    - During the individual interviews, participants will be asked to share any relevant documents such as portfolios, resumes, training records, certificates, awards and recognitions
    - During each individual interview and while reviewing the participants personal artifacts and documents, I will take detailed notes and transcribe interview afterwards
    - Transcripts will be provided to participant for member check
    - Analyze the data from the first participant
    - Repeat the steps for the remaining participants
- Conduct focus group interviews and document collection
    - Focus group interviews will be videotaped with participants' permission and transcribed
    - During focus group I will take detailed notes
- Analyze the complete data through coding using NVivo, evaluation and interpretation of each case as well as cross-case analysis to identify general categories and themes
- Write the final report