

**A NARRATIVE STUDY ON THE ROLE OF MENTORSHIP IN THE CAREER
TRAJECTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS
AND THOSE ASPIRING TOWARDS THE SUPERINTENDENCY**

by
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Dedication

From my heavenly father, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, but to give you a future and a hope” Jeremiah 29: 11. To my father, who is in heaven resting, although you did not get to see the completion of what we started I sure hope you’re smiling now. I dedicate this to you for being my first inspiration to see this world as limitless. You were always my biggest fan and I hope I’m still making you proud.

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Abstract

Background: Women of color represent 15% of the nation's teachers, 13% of the nation's principals, but only eight percent of the nation's superintendents. The absence of women of color at the superintendent level is not a result of the scarcity in the talent pool but a result of the systematic, structural divide that exists in the education system.

Problem: As a single group, Black women are almost nonexistent in the role of superintendent in public school districts. Lack of mentorship has been noted as one reason why so few Black women have achieved the job of superintendent. **Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of mentorship for African American women superintendents and African American women who aspire towards the superintendency. **RQ 1:** What difference does mentoring play in the experiences of African American women leaders who aspire towards the position and for those serving in the superintendency? **RQ 2:** What difference does mentoring make on the self-defining knowledge claims of African American women as they navigate race, gender, and class oppressions within their aspirations to the superintendency and career trajectories?

Methods: Through this qualitative research study, I used an in-depth narrative inquiry approach to understand the experiences of mentoring for African American women superintendents and those aspiring towards the position. I utilized qualitative semi-structured interviews as well as a focus group and document analysis. I recruited eight participants for the study. These participants included sitting superintendents and central office administrators aspiring to the superintendency. I utilized the narrative thematic analysis process to make meaning of the data collected. The data was coded to find emergent themes that were interpreted for meaning. **Findings:** Black Feminist Thought,

is the conceptual framework that undergirded the study. The findings were in line with the extant literature on mentoring for Black women leaders in education. The collective narratives emphasized the paradoxical space of them being both a woman and a Black woman in educational leadership. The analysis of the narratives assert that mentoring was beneficial and a necessity to their ascension towards the superintendency. While mentoring proved to be beneficial, sponsorship deemed to move them through the pipeline to the superintendency. Being grounded in their faith and reliance on supportive networks were essential to them thriving in the role. For those participants that experienced successful mentoring relationships they congruently experienced a swifter career trajectory. As Black women climbing the career ladder in a White male dominated field, they individually expressed that it was equally important for them to lead as their authentic self, acknowledging the intersections of their identities. **Conclusion:** Albeit, there is a sparse number of African American women superintendents represented in K-12 schools, the participants managed to engage in formal and informal networks of support that nurtured them with the professional and social counterspace to share their experiences. Further for Black women, leading from a place of authenticity provided a safe space for them to engage and make connections within their communities.

Keywords: African American woman, Black Feminist Thought, Career Trajectory, Intersectionality, Mentorship, Narrative Inquiry, Sponsorship, Superintendent

Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
I. Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	7
Purpose and Significance of the Study	11
Conceptual Framework	16
Research Questions	21
Definition of Key Terms	22
II. Review of Literature.....	24
Introduction	24
Conceptual Framework: Black Feminist Thought.....	25
Criterion of Meaning.....	31
The Use of Dialogue	32
Ethic of Caring	33
Ethic of Personal Accountability	34
Intersectionality - Race and Gender	35
Women in Educational Leadership	40
African American Women in Educational Leadership	41
Mentoring and Networking.....	43
Same Race Mentors	45
Overview of the Superintendency	52
Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar 1850 to Early 1900s	54
Superintendent as Organizational Manager 1900s to 1930	54
Superintendent as Democratic-Political Leader 1930 to mid-1950s	56
Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist mid-1950s to mid-1970s	57
Superintendent as Communicator mid-1970s to Present	58
The Principal Pipeline.....	59
A Seat at the Table: Moving Towards Parity.....	60
Gendered Pathways for Women to the Superintendency	62
Instructional Pathway.....	63
The Path Less Traveled.....	65
The Path to the Top Seat	66
Good Ole' Boy Network	68

Summary	70
III. Methodology	71
Introduction	71
Research Design.....	72
Narrative Inquiry.....	74
Study Participants, Population, and Sampling Strategy.....	77
Research Site.....	79
Data Collection and Management.....	80
Data Analysis	82
Standards of Validity and Reliability.....	85
Researcher’s Positionality.....	86
Ethical Considerations	88
Limitations	88
Summary	89
IV. Data Analysis and Findings	90
Introduction.....	90
Description of Participants.....	93
Superintendent Participants	93
Dr. Sullivan	94
Dr. Adams	95
Dr. Goodman.....	96
Aspiring Superintendent Participants	99
Dr. Brown	100
Dr. Thompson	101
Dr. Drake.....	103
Ms. Myers	104
Dr. Rhodes	105
Findings for Research Question #1	107
Career Pathway	108
Superintendent Participants	108
Aspiring Superintendents.....	116
Mentoring as a Necessity	121
Superintendent Participants	122
The Power of the Network	129

Paying it Forward.....	133
Aspiring Superintendents.....	137
Findings for Research Question #2.....	143
Superintendent Participants	144
Am I One and Not the Other?	144
Unapologetically Me.....	153
Know Your Net Worth.....	156
Aspiring Superintendents	159
Black Excellence.....	159
The Fear Factor	163
Summary	165
V. Discussion and Conclusion	168
Introduction.....	168
Discussion.....	169
Thematic Connections to Black Feminist Thought	171
Criterion of Meaning.....	172
Career Pathway	172
Am I One and Not the Other?	173
Black Excellence.....	176
The Use of Dialogue	178
The Fear Factor	178
Ethic of Caring.....	180
Mentoring as a Necessity	181
The Power of the Network.....	183
Ethic of Personal Accountability	184
Paying it Forward.....	185
Unapologetically Me.....	187
Know your Net Worth	188
Implications for Practice	190
Aspiring Superintendents.....	191
District Leaders	192
Superintendent Preparation Programs	193
Implications for Policy	194
Implications for Future Research	194

Limitations	197
Conclusion	197
Appendix A: Recruitment Email Script	200
Appendix B: Interview Protocol Questions	203
Appendix C: Focus Group Questions	208
Appendix D: IRB Approval	209
Appendix E: Consent for Human Research	212
References	221

List of Tables

Table	Page
Table 1: Too Few Women at the Top: Women and Women of Color in Educational Leadership	4
Table 2: Women Superintendents in the United States	61
Table 3: Thematic Concepts and Black Feminist Thought.....	85
Table 4: Superintendent Profiles.....	98
Table 5: Aspiring Superintendent Profiles.....	106

List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1: From a Black Feminist Thought Construct	20

Chapter I

Introduction

Women make up 51% of the total United States population (United States Census Bureau, 2019). However, women are not proportionately represented in leadership roles within the workplace. Despite the rising percentage of women college graduates and the fact that women are 47% of the workforce, they still make up a low percentage of the leadership ranks in business, politics, and other sectors (Catalyst, 2020; Chiefs for Change, 2020). For example, in Fortune 500 companies, women recede from the pipeline steadily, holding 44% of employee positions, 37% of lower and middle management jobs, 27% of executive and senior management titles, and just 11% of top-earning roles (Catalyst, 2020). Only five percent of Fortune 500 companies are led by a woman, which equates to a mere 27 out of 500 corporations (Catalyst, 2020). Conventional wisdom holds that women are not proportionately represented in leadership ranks because of the glass ceiling. In the business sector, the “glass ceiling” is defined as the invisible institutional barriers that exist and operate to exclude minorities and women from top levels of management (United States Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). The glass ceiling emanates the invisible, impenetrable divide between women and the executive suite, preventing them from reaching the highest levels within the business world regardless of their accomplishments and merits (United States Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

Comparatively, such a gender disparity also exists in higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), women comprise 46% of the 1.5 million faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions. Faculty includes professors,

associate professors, assistant professors, instructors, lecturers, assisting professors, adjunct professors, and interim professors (NCES, 2020). In contrast, women make up only 30% of college and university presidencies (Howard & Gagliardi, 2017). In 1986, women made up just 9.5% of college and university presidents, yet if the proportion of women presidents continues increasing at the same annual growth rate, at nearly four percentage points, gender parity in the presidency could occur by 2030 (Howard & Gagliardi, 2017). The lack of women representation is a problem not only because it begs questions of fairness and equity but also because diversity brings improvements in learning and expands leadership perspectives (Allred et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2017; United States Department of Education, 2016).

Similarly, women are not represented equally in K-12 educational leadership roles. In other words, even though they dominate in the classrooms and in elementary principalships, they represent less than a third of the top leadership position in K-12 (AASA, 2020; NCES, 2018). The high school principalship is traditionally the most traveled path to the superintendency (Davis & Bowers, 2018; Robinson et al., 2017; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Contrary to the elementary principalship, women represent 33% of the high school principalship and their representation is often compounded with the fact that they must work harder and longer to become principals (NCES, 2020). According to survey data from National Center for Education Statistics (2018), women comprise approximately 76% of the nation's teachers, 54% of the nation's principals but only 27% of the nation's superintendents. These statistics stand in stark contrast to the fact that girls comprise 49% of K-12 public schools nationwide (NCES, 2018).

As more women enter into leadership roles within education, past research revealed the benefits that women bring, including: the opportunities to serve as role models for culturally diverse students; providing a more humanistic and relational style of leadership; and a unique understanding and commitment to ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Dillard, 1995; Grogan, 1999; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Although Davis & Bowers (2018) and Robinson et al. (2017) studies' found that women have made significant strides in achieving parity with men regarding job mobility, length of time in the classroom before ascending to the ranks of leadership, and increased mentoring, men are still far more likely to be appointed superintendent than women. Unfortunately, women make up the majority of roles in education, except at the very top (Alston, 2000; Bailey-Walker, 2018; Brown, 2005; NCES, 2018).

More than a decade ago, the Census Bureau identified the superintendency as the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States (Glass, 1992; Shakeshaft, 2011). Skrla et al. (2000) refer to the superintendency as gender stratified. Accordingly, that characterization is still relevant according to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) (2015). The gender breakdown is still overwhelmingly male-dominated with only 26.8% of women serving as superintendents (AASA, 2020).

The gender disparities in leadership are more acute when the K-12 data is disaggregated by race and ethnicity. Women of color represent 15% of the nation's teachers, 13% of the nation's principals, but only eight percent of the nation's

superintendents (AASA, 2020; NCES, 2018). Table 1 is a representation of the women and women of color in leadership positions in education¹.

Table 1

Too Few Women at the Top: Women and Women of Color in Educational Leadership

	Women	Women of Color
<i>District Chiefs</i>	31%	11%
<i>Cabinet-Level Leaders</i>	64%	25%
<i>Principals</i>	54%	13%
<i>Teachers</i>	77%	15%

The data is suggestive that Black women's involvement in school administration historically is limited beyond the role of principalship (Alston, 2000; Brown, 2014; Chiefs for Change, 2020). The absence of women of color at the superintendent level is not due to a scarcity in the talent pool but a result of the systematic, structural divide that exists in the education system (Brookins, 2018; Edwards, 2016; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Women of color work hard to gain greater race and gender equality in the workplace, yet they still face institutional barriers that circumvent them from attaining top-level positions (Jean-Marie et al., 2016; Munoz et al., 2014; Myung et al., 2011; Tillman, 2004).

Beyond that, Brunner and Grogan (2007), Edwards (2016), and Jenkins (2019) posit that one reason why so few women have achieved the job of superintendent is due to a lack of support in the form of mentorship. Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) assert that mentors play a crucial role in developing the skills of a superintendent, no matter the

¹ Source: Chiefs for Change. (2020). Breaking Through: Shattering the Glass Ceiling for Women Leaders. Data includes publicly reported figures on local education websites as of November 2018 including superintendents from the top five largest school districts in each state; cabinet-level leader data using publicly reported information as available on gender, race, and ethnicity as of August 2018; principal and teacher data from the 2015-2016 edition of the NCES: National Teacher and Principal Survey.

years of experience in the position. However, a challenge for women of color and African American women, in particular, is that the most recent comprehensive study on superintendents revealed that leaders were more likely to mentor those like themselves (AASA, 2015).

According to the AASA (2015), White women are the most mentored group, followed by White men, then women of color, and finally men of color. White women reported mentoring White women more than any other group (56%); White men mentored White men more than any other group (64%); women of color mentored women of color more than any other group (39%) and men of color mentored other men of color other than any other group (52%). Consequently, as women have entered into school leadership, many have experienced limited access to productive mentoring relationships, further limiting their access to school and district leadership positions (Angel et al., 2013; Munoz et al., 2014; Peters, 2010; Shore et al., 2009). Thus, while a small percentage of African American women have attained the role of superintendent, few experience mentoring from other women due to the lack of women in the role (Brookins, 2018; Hansen, 2019).

Hudson et al. (1998) conducted a study more than two decades ago which cited four themes that African American women superintendents and leaders bring to educational leadership: strength and perseverance, advocacy for all children, the duty to act as role models and sources of pride for their communities, and feelings of isolation. Approximately seven years later, Brown (2005) remarked that diversity of the student population called for expanded notions of “leadership theory, preparation, and practice” (p. 585). Broadening the education literature with perspectives of African Americans was

essential, Brown (2005) argues, to produce leaders equipped with the skills for a diverse student population.

The literature on education leadership, irrespective of still scant representation of women of color, has identified several benefits that women leaders possess. For example, women of color tend to pursue activism in roles of educational leadership (Grogan, 1999; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Oesterreich, 2007; Rosser-Mims, 2010). Their purview and aspirations are to serve as change agents, share power, and create shared visions with open lines of communication (Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015). Besides serving as role models for students and staff, some African American women superintendents play a critical role in influencing educators to raise academic and behavioral expectations for poor and minority students (Edwards, 2016; Tillman & Cochran, 2000).

Previous studies regarding women of color and the superintendency have been limited to the examination of the career paths, the challenges that women face upon entry and securing the superintendency, and the social inequities that African American women face when seeking the position of superintendent (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Baker, 2018; Brown, 2014, Corbin et al., 2018; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Foster, 2018; Horsford, 2012; Jean-Marie, 2013). Few studies have examined African American women in educational leadership and their personal narratives on the specific impact of mentorship toward career advancement, in particular towards the superintendence. A search of the literature in the last five years regarding African American women superintendents with few exceptions, did not reveal any studies with an explicit focus on mentoring (Brown, 2018; Bailey-Walker, 2018; Foster, 2018; Kennedy, 2019). The notable exception was Sherrard's (2019) dissertation study that explores the roles of networking, mentoring, and

support systems in the lives of 10 African American women superintendents in the state of Texas. Another exception was a dissertation study conducted by Thompson (2018) who examines the impact of a structured mentoring program on 10 African American superintendents in Alabama.

Because there is a limited number of African American women who hold the position of superintendent, accounts of their experiences are minimal in scholarly literature. Through this study I explore the leadership perspectives on mentoring regarding African American women. Ascertaining their perspectives is relevant to the advancement of women, particularly women of color who aspire towards the role of superintendent because their leadership perspectives and experiences provide a framework for understanding how their work and experiences have been impacted by mentoring, in order to retain and thrive in their position of superintendence.

Statement of the Problem

In education, the role of superintendent traditionally has been held by White men (Glass, 1992; Robinson et al., 2017; Skrla, 2000). The imbalance of power dates back to the 19th century where the role was specifically designed for male leaders (Chiefs for Change, 2020; Robinson et al., 2017). There is cause for concern that so few women hold the position of superintendent since there are numerous studies that attest to the benefits of women leadership (Baker, 2018; Kennedy, 2019; Moss, 2019). Research shows that while women make up most of the educator workforce, they are disproportionately underrepresented in executive leadership positions (AASA, 2015; NCES, 2018). There are a number of reasons why this may be the case.

First, women tend to encounter many formidable barriers as they attempt to gain access and equity in educational environments that differ from men (Allred et al., 2017; Grant, 2012; Jenkins, 2019). Women do not have access to the informal networks that White men use to understand the administrative culture necessary for the successful socialization and induction of aspiring leaders (Sperandio & LaPier, 2009). Additionally, when compared to men, women are still perceived as being inferior in both strength and intelligence and by extension, less effective leaders (McLean et al., 2016; Munoz et al., 2014; Skrla et al., 2000). As a result, their ascension towards the superintendency is much different from their male counterparts. A key factor towards advancing to the role of superintendent for women involves their stamina or perseverance to sustain challenges rather than ability or experience (DiCanio et al., 2016; Moss, 2019; Sherrard, 2019). In as much, women of color encounter greater difficulty in accessing the role of the superintendent (Carpenter & Diem, 2014; Davis & Bowers, 2018; Jean-Marie et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2019; Munoz et al., 2014; Revere, 1987; Shakeshaft, 1999). Little has changed in recent years as women of color are only two percent of the national superintendent population (NCES, 2018).

Second, unlike their White male counterparts, women of color can experience a zig-zag pattern, one that is not linear nor visible throughout their career pathway to the top leadership position because the pathway is impacted by race and gender (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Foster, 2018; Robinson et al., 2017). For men, the career path more likely involved three steps: classroom teacher, high school principal, and then superintendent. In contrast, for women the career path involved four steps: teacher, elementary principal, central office director, and then superintendent (Baker,

2018; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2000; Foster, 2018; Kowalski et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2017). The fact that men dominate the high school principal position poses an additional barrier for women towards the superintendency. Nevertheless, school principal is a position that is a likely step in the career path of those who have reached the top (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Tallerico, 2000b; Vail, 1999).

For women administrators at the elementary level who aspire to become superintendent, acquiring a doctoral degree and holding district level positions in curriculum and instruction management is paramount, while administrators at the high school level who aspire to the position benefit from the use of a mentor (DiCanio et al., 2016). In turn, women have learned to seek alternative pathways that lead to the superintendency, in spite of the barriers and pathways that have historically excluded women from the top K-12 leadership position. Mentoring is an effective resource for navigating the leadership path in education (Baker, 2018; Cox, 2017; Sherrard, 2019; Thompson, 2018). In this study, a mentor is defined “as one who helps teach an aspirant the job responsibilities and norms of the superintendency, and who helps the aspirant grow personally and professionally in pursuit of that position” (MacTavish, 2010, p. 8). Research has further referenced mentoring as a key tool towards career advancement for Black women (Holder et al., 2015). Mentoring provides access to influential networks which in turn provide insight on informal and unwritten rules of the organization. More precisely, mentors are those who can connect talented and high potential Black women to key networks of influence and open doors for Black women to advance towards leadership positions (Holder et al., 2015; Jenkins, 2019; Sherrard, 2019). These are all specific benefits of mentoring shown to directly benefit Black women.

Consequently, the low number of African American women superintendents is problematic. The problem exists because leaders tend to mentor those like themselves (AASA, 2015). “As women move into educational leadership, the support of others who share similar principles or experiences can be invaluable in helping women to be supported and believe in themselves” (Gardiner et al., 2000, p. 62). Since the majority of school administrators are White men, women of color face the “double bind”--race and gender (Johnson et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018). With so few African American women superintendents, the ability to network, seek mentorship, and share the stories of those who may have similar experiences poses a challenge for those in the role or to those pursuing the position of superintendent (Jenkins, 2019). About half of women of color reported mentoring another superintendent (AASA, 2015). Many successful professionals credit their success to mentoring by a veteran within the field who helped to guide their careers (Cox, 2017; Ehrich, 1994; Hewlett et al., 2012; MacTavish, 2010; Sherrard, 2019).

It is advantageous for African American women to seek productive mentoring relationships when seeking the superintendency to attain and also retain the position (Baker, 2018; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Cox, 2017; Jenkins, 2019; Munoz et al., 2014; Peters, 2010). The problem therein lies with the fact that there is a lack of professional mentors who readily mentor Black women who aspire towards the superintendency. Additionally, for those Black women who attain district level positions, a common pathway for women to the superintendence, not only is mentorship necessary, but sponsorship becomes integral towards their advancement. Without proper mentorship or sponsorship, many aspiring African American administrators find it problematic to

advance their careers (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Fields et al., 2019; Hansen, 2019; Jenkins, 2019; Sherrard, 2019). According to research from the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) (2014), African American superintendents who were surveyed found their affiliation with this professional organization beneficial in their pursuits to network and access position opportunities. Professional networks established safe opportunities for those aspiring towards the superintendency to be mentored or provide mentorship to aspirants within the association (Jenkins, 2019; NABSE, 2014; Sherrard, 2019).

In conclusion, research suggests that mentorship is essential in helping to advance the careers of African American women towards the superintendency (Cox, 2017; Fields et al., 2019; Hansen, 2019; Munoz et al., 2014; Peters, 2010). Moreover, research suggests that even though there are benefits to cross-racial mentoring (Freeman & Kochan, 2019; Guramatunhu-Mudiwa & Angel, 2017), African American women are at a distinct disadvantage. This study is designed to explore how African American women superintendents experience mentoring. The goal is to understand their perspectives on its role in their ascent to the superintendency and on its role in sustaining them through professional challenges. Examining the personal stories of individuals along this pathway provides insight into their mentoring relationships, which in turn may better prepare those who aspire towards the superintendency.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence or contributions of mentorship for African American women superintendents and central office administrators in their ascension to the superintendency. Understanding their stories and

perspectives on mentorship on their career trajectory may add compelling knowledge to the current body of scholarship in educational administration. The double oppression of race and gender that African American women face is often overshadowed by the experiences of their White counterparts, and their stories are left untold and unacknowledged. To understand African American women and the multiplicative aspects of identity is to understand that their identity is grounded in their perceptions of self and their experiences (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2016; Spelman, 2001).

Thereby, the significance of this study points to the systemic, oppressive factors that compound the duality of race and gender intersections for Black women in educational leadership roles, specifically the superintendency. Albeit, “education has persisted as one of the most consistent themes in the life, thought, struggle, and protest of Black Americans” (Collier-Thomas, 1982, p. 173). There is a large body of research that takes into account the educational experiences of African Americans (Cartlidge et al., 2012; Collier-Thomas, 1982; Ford & Moore, 2013; Konzol, 2005; Moore & Lewis, 2014; Zirkel & Cantor, 2004). Additional studies have focused on the impact of women in education (Barshay, 2020; Jenkins, 2019; Johnson et al., 2020). But, as women seek to move into leadership positions, their experiences and perspectives are often negated from the body of scholarly literature (Brown, 2014; Dillard, 2000; Edwards, 2016; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Much of the research on women in educational leadership roles centers on the effects of the proverbial glass ceiling (Glass, 2000; Maranto et al., 2018; Shakeshaft, 1989, 2011), gender bias and discrimination (Alston, 2000; Brown, 2014; Brunner & Grogan, 2007), mentoring (Augustine-Shaw & Funk, 2013; Brookins, 2018; Gardiner et al., 2000; Jeruchim & Shapiro, 1992; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006;

Peters, 2010; Shakeshaft, 1989), and career pathways (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Kowalski et al., 2011; Polinchock, 2013; Shakeshaft, 1989; Sperandio, 2015).

The literature related specifically to the superintendency is also extensive (AASA, 2015; Baker, 2018; Brookins, 2018; Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009; Hansen, 2019; Kennedy, 2019; Sherrard, 2019). However, most studies emphasize the disparate gender demographics (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Maranto et al., 2017; Sargent, 2001), existing power structures (Bjork, 2001; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2012; Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014; Shafritz & Ott, 2001; Tallerico, 2000a, 2000b), school board/community relations (Maeroff, 2010; Maranto et al., 2017; Munoz et al., 2014), fiscal acuity (Glass, 2000; Munoz et al., 2014); leadership behaviors (Brunner, 1995; Holtkamp, 2001; Truslow, 2004), and career development (Farmer, 2007; Maranto et al., 2017; Polinchock, 2013; Superville, 2016) through the historical context of White male dominance, and to a lesser extent, through the lens of White women.

There is growing research on the absence of African American women in the superintendency (Alston, 2000; Bailey-Walker, 2018; Baker, 2018; Brown, 2018; Dillard, 2000; Foster, 2018; Hinds, 2016; Jenkins, 2019; Thompson, 2018; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Although more researchers are featuring African Americans and other women of color in the superintendency (Brown, 2018; Edwards, 2016; Moss, 2019), comparatively little empirical research exists that captures the full scope of their experiences (Gray, 2015; Johnson et al., 2020). Previous work has been limited to the examination of the career path of Black women to the superintendency (AASA, 2015; Brunner & Grogan,

2007; Robinson et al., 2017; Shakeshaft, 1987, 2011), the challenges that Black women face upon entry and securing the superintendency (Brown, 2014; Cognard-Black, 2004; Harrell, 2000; Holder et al., 2015; Jean-Marie, 2013; Lewis et al., 2013; Myung, et al., 2011; Peters, 2012; Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014; Tillman, 2004; White et al., 2019), and the social inequities that Black women face when seeking the position of superintendent (Collins, 2015; Corbin et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; Dillard, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Skrla et al., 2000). However, much of the research has failed to specifically examine African American women in educational leadership and their experiences of mentorship towards career advancement, specifically the superintendency. There is a need to examine the experiences of these women to understand how the intersections of race and gender confound their perspectives of mentoring as African American and woman in their journey to the role of superintendent.

Research has indicated that non-White voices are valued in the context of African American superintendents. Multiple studies have shown benefits for students of color when they have teachers of the same race (Miller, 2018; O'Donnell, 2019; Ordway, 2017). One cited benefit is that a diverse teacher workforce can lead to a diverse administrative workforce (O'Donnell, 2019). Consequently, as the nation's student population becomes less White, diversity in teacher, principal, and superintendent roles are necessary.

According to Hansen and Quintero (2018), research has shown that people of color in administrative and executive level positions can replace stereotyping and unconscious biases with acceptance and trust. Further, Hansen and Quintero (2018) point

out that they have a distinct advantage when interacting with community members who share similar racial or ethnic backgrounds and can offer a different perspective for academic programming targeting students of color and direct student outcomes. When incoming teachers are diverse and they ascend to leadership positions their influence is multiplied (Hansen & Quintero, 2018; Miller, 2018; O'Donnell, 2019).

The ongoing research on women in educational leadership has provided slow progress to clarify and confirm the existing barriers that aspiring women leaders face (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Sperandio, 2015). Specifically, the Black women's leadership experiences and "herstories" are absent from the educational leadership perspective (Alston, 2012, p. 127), compared to the dominant White male discourse. Despite growing efforts to address this less than explored topic of Black women's leadership experiences, research methodologies have not fully recognized that African American women educational leaders have unique needs distinctly different from their White male, White female, and other male counterparts (Johnson et al., 2020). While Black women navigate educational hierarchies towards career advancement they are often fatigued, disillusioned, physically/mentally depleted, and lonely when they reach their personal and professional goals (Johnson et al., 2020). These experiences must be captured to bring awareness to the needs of Black women who aspire to educational leadership positions. Due to the paucity of research on the lived experiences of Black women superintendents and aspirants and their perspectives of mentoring on their career trajectory, it is imperative that research includes their voices and examines how their racial and gendered identities influence their experiences (Brown, 2005; Cox, 2017). Liang and Peters-Hawkins (2017) and Bloom and Erlandson (2003) named

knowledge suppression as a threat to the economic, political, and social vitalization of Black women and their realities. They further argued that the absence of historically underrepresented groups and their stories within educational leadership allows for the continuation of discourse that “perpetuates a system that refuses to acknowledge the genuine needs and legitimate concerns of women, and fails to provide access and equity to those who aspire to leadership” (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017, p. 42). Knowledge suppression can occur through omission as well as commission.

One could argue that the acknowledgment and documentation of the lived experiences of Black women add to the current body of knowledge because it can lead to an ever-growing dialogue that expands the understanding of leadership paradigms that value non-White perspectives. There is a great need for emerging researchers to illuminate the experiential behaviors of women of color, with a focus on mentoring for those who aspire to and achieve the top position in educational leadership (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Sherrard, 2019; Wesson & Marshall, 2012). Through the accounts of educational leaders, this study uncovers a phenomena of Black women’s perspectives and experiences on mentoring that has been minimally represented in empirical studies. Moreover, aspiring leaders may reflect on their own journeys and benefit from the stories of others as they seek the role of superintendent.

Conceptual Framework

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), conceptual frameworks use a lens or perspective in qualitative research that provides an overall orientation for the study’s questions, in this case, gender, class, and race. This study is framed using historical and contemporary articulations of intersectional Black feminist thinking, that encourages

Black women to create new self-definitions that validate their standpoint, developed from Black Feminist Thought. An overview of Black Feminist Thought is presented here.

Further explanation of how intersectionality and the evolution of twenty-first century Black feminism articulations are applied in this study and discussed in the next chapter.

Black Feminist Thought is widely regarded as a suitable conceptual framework and relevant body of knowledge for conducting research on women of color (Amoah, 2013; Cole, 2019; Griffin, 2016; Zinn, 2012). Black Feminist Thought was theorized by Collins (1986), a sociologist, as an avenue to understand and explain the special viewpoint of African American women in the United States. Collins (1986) argues that Black women, in a broad sense, because of their history in this country, understand White people in ways White people do not understand themselves. Conjunctively, based on their status as both *insiders* participants in the intimate lives of White people and their status as *outsiders* prevented from enjoying the rights and privileges afforded to White people. According to Collins (1986), the dual *insider/outsider* status produces a perspective on self, family, and society that is unique from White men and women and Black men. Cast as political activism, Black Feminist Thought can further understanding of the narratives of African American women superintendents in how they navigate institutional racism, sexism, and classism within the context of mentoring.

Although Collins is the forerunner in the groundbreaking literature on Black Feminist Thought other African American feminist scholars such as Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005), Cooper (2015), Crenshaw (1989), Dillard (2000), and Guy-Sheftall (2008), have expounded and advanced this thinking as well. Their contributions to this conceptual framework have furthered the dialogue in contemporary feminist scholarship. As such,

this study is informed by Collins' use of the theory, and includes contemporary epistemologies to examine these women's mentoring experiences and its role in their career trajectories.

Examining the scholarship of African American female writers, Collins (1986) identifies three key themes that characterizes Black Feminist Thought: (1) the meaning of self-definition and self-valuation; (2) the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression; and (3) the importance of Black women's cultures (Collins, 1986). The first theme, self-definition, and self-valuation, concern the manner in which African American women cast their own images of themselves, eschewing stereotypical definitions of Black womanhood constructed by the ethos of White Supremacy. The second theme acknowledged the powerful confluence of race, gender, and class in the lives of African American women. Finally, Collins (1986) recognizes the unique cultural principles both retained by Black people from Africa and the cultural principles developed independently of White Supremacy by Black people (Collins, 2003). Some cultural principles are passed from African American women to their families and communities.

Collins further contextualizes the experiences and knowledge of Black women from a Black woman's standpoint and epistemology for assessing knowledge claims within the constructs of Black Feminist Thought. African American women have developed a distinctive Black woman's standpoint but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge (Collins, 2003). Specifically, these interlocking experiences transcend divisions among women created by race, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and ethnicity and form the basis of a woman's standpoint

with a corresponding feminist consciousness and epistemology (Hartsock, 1983a; Jaggar, 1983; Rosaldo, 1974; Smith, 1987).

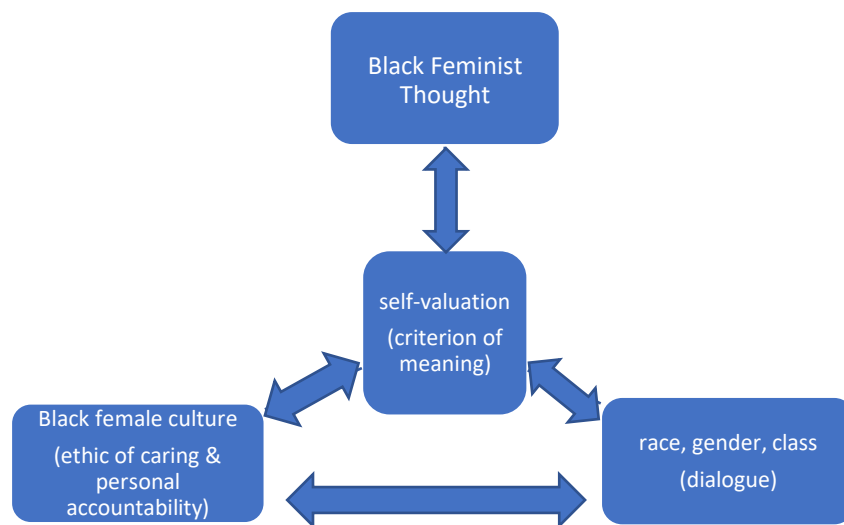
Epistemology is the study of the philosophical problems in concepts of knowledge and truth (Collins, 2003). Collins (2003) contends that since Black women have access to both African American women's self-defined knowledge claims and the feminist standpoints, an alternative epistemology should be utilized to rearticulate a Black woman's standpoint and should reflect elements of both traditions generating uniformity in the epistemologies of subordinate groups. To this end, Collins posits recommendations that reflect elements of epistemologies used by African Americans and women as groups, and also paradoxically demonstrates features that are unique to Black women (Collins, 2003). Like a Black woman's standpoint, this alternative epistemology is rooted in the everyday experiences of African American women (Collins, 2003).

This study explores the four dimensions for a Black feminist knowledge validation process as they relate to the key themes of Black Feminist Thought. The first dimension, criterion of meaning, depicts two types of knowing—knowledge and wisdom. Collins (2003) explains that knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to Black women's survival. The second dimension, the use of dialogue, emanates from deep roots in an African based oral tradition and in African American culture (Kochman, 1981; Sidran, 1971; Smitherman, 1977; Stanback, 1985). African American women use dialogue in assessing knowledge claims and have a high degree of support for invoking dialogue as a dimension of Afrocentric feminist epistemology (Collins, 2003). The third dimension acknowledges an ethic of caring. The ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central

to the knowledge validation process (Collins, 2003). The final dimension is an ethic of personal accountability. Collins (2003) emphasizes that not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style proving their concern for their ideas, but people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims. These alternative ways of procuring and validating knowledge pose an epistemological uniqueness that contrasts the dominant White male paradigm (Anderson, 2020; Combahee River Collective, 1981). Figure 1 illustrates the construct of Black Feminist Thought as a means to understand and validate Black women's knowledge and experiences.

Figure 1

From a Black Feminist Thought Construct



Collins insists Black feminism is a continuation of the legacy of political activism in the Black community, not merely a derivative of White feminism (Willett & Bell, 2017). According to Chisholm-Burns et al. (2017), although African American women have made significant strides educationally, socially, and economically, they still face historic racial and gender barriers to reaching their full potential. Chapter II further

explores other contemporary articulations that researchers posit for Black feminist epistemologies.

Research Questions

The research questions for this qualitative narrative study serve as a basis to explore the experiences and perspectives of African American women leaders who have attained or seek to attain the superintendency. The central research question is: What role does mentorship play in the career trajectory of African American women who aspire to and serve in the superintendency? Additional questions are:

(RQ1) What difference does mentoring play in the experiences of African American women leaders who aspire towards the position and for those serving in the superintendency?

(RQ2) What difference does mentoring make on the self-defining knowledge claims of African American women as they navigate race, gender, and class oppressions within their aspirations to the superintendency and career trajectories?

The role of mentoring for African American superintendents and those who aspire to the role is important to understand as they navigate their career pathways.

Understanding the presence of mentorship and its effectiveness gives insight to the experiences of those in the role and for those who aspire towards the superintendency. I explore how Black women superintendents and those who aspire to the role make sense and meaning of their mentoring experiences, as Black women navigating a role held predominantly by White men. While their career trajectories and experiences are starkly

different it is equally important to highlight their experiences at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

Definition of Key Terms

African American woman: The United States Census Bureau (2000) described Black or African American as a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. For the purpose of this research, Black or African American women are women who are of Sub-Saharan African and Afro-diasporic descent and self-identify as Black.

Throughout this study, African American women will be used interchangeably with Black women.

Black Feminist Thought: A theory that centralizes and validates the intersecting dimensions of race and gender uniquely experienced in the lives of African American women (Collins, 1989).

Career Trajectory: A path or process of development that one takes throughout their working life.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s from critical race studies, a scholarly movement born in the legal academy committed to problematizing law's purported color-blindness, neutrality, and objectivity (Crenshaw et al., 1996). For the purpose of this study, intersectionality will be used to articulate a claim of dual discrimination in which Black women are seen as both women who are Black and as Black people who are women. Further, the emphasis that Black women deal with both intersecting identities while addressing race and gender, whereas Black men and White women do not face these oppressive intersections is addressed in the study. There are

“competing agendas” (Tyson, 1998, p. 21) that place race at the center while simultaneously considering gender.

Mentorship: Someone who provides counsel and moral support through a lasting relationship for an aspiring administrator (MacTavish, 2010). Mentoring has been established as a human resource practice and as an individual strategy for career success (Atkinson, 2002; Knouse, 2001). Mentorship provides professional advocacy for the protégé in ways that help to promote career ascension. Mentors provide counseling, career guidance and development, and help to open doors for the protégé towards their upward mobility.

Narrative Inquiry: A research study approach that focuses on experiences of individuals as expressed in lived and told stories of an individual’s perspective. The approach emerged out of a literary, storytelling tradition. Narrative researchers collect and record stories using interviews, observations, and documents to report those experiences by chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry can reveal unique perspectives and deeper understanding of a situation.

Sponsorship: One who actively champions and makes contacts on behalf of an aspirant in order to gain a desired position (MacTavish, 2010). Sponsorship goes beyond mentorship and provides one with access to positions based on their relationship or network.

Superintendent: The top central office administrator who oversees and is responsible for all central office operations, and reports to the school board in a K-12 school district, (Munoz et al., 2018).

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this study explores the lived experiences of African American superintendents and those who aspire to the superintendency, and their mentoring experiences along their career trajectories. The qualitative study informs scholarly literature based on the perspectives and narratives of African American women leaders who have attained the superintendency or seek to attain the superintendency. The central research question is: What role does mentorship play in the career trajectory of African American women who aspire to and serve in the superintendency? Additional questions are: (RQ1) What difference does mentoring play in the experiences of African American women leaders who aspire towards the position and for those serving in the superintendency? and (RQ2) What difference does mentoring make on the self-defining knowledge claims of African American women as they navigate race, gender, and class oppressions within their aspirations to the superintendency and career trajectories?

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework that undergirds the study and provides a review of the extant literature related to Black women superintendents and mentoring. First, the chapter outlines the conceptual framework, Black Feminist Thought theorized by Patricia Hill Collins (2003). The framework is further explored to highlight the four tenets of knowledge validation to understand the lived experiences of Black women leaders. The following tenets are defined in this chapter: (1) criterion of meaning, (2) the use of dialogue, (3) the ethic of caring, and (4) the ethic of personal accountability. Second, a review of literature on the intersectionality of race and gender is

explored to provide insight to how African American women manage their intersectional identities while navigating their careers in district and school leadership positions. This is important to understand the confluence of these identity markers for African American women in how they receive mentoring and the impacts on their career trajectories. Next, the review of literature expounds on the historical purview of women in educational leadership, African American women in leadership, and mentoring. This chapter further explores literature related to the historical context of the responsibilities as superintendent. Lastly, this chapter discusses the extant literature on the gendered pathways for women in the superintendency. The peer reviewed literature provides a firm foundation to understanding the analysis of findings and conclusions. The next section details the conceptual framework of the study.

Conceptual Framework: Black Feminist Thought

The purpose of this section is to outline the conceptual framework that undergirds the study. In this section, the conceptual framework is defined and the epistemological tenets are explored to understand the lived experiences of Black women leaders. Black Feminist Thought is a theoretical approach aimed at developing a standpoint that accurately captures the true and real experiences of Black womanhood with Black women at the center of analysis (Jones et al., 2013; Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey, 1999). Black Feminist Thought includes ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women (Collins, 1986). Collins (1986) ascertains that for this reason Black Feminist Thought can be produced *only* by Black women. Black Feminist Thought places an emphasis on the experiences of African American women as opposed to the frames of knowledge based on the experiences of those in the majority (Collins,

2000). As Collins (2003) further conceptualizes the distinguishing features of an alternative epistemology used to rearticulate an African American women's standpoint, she revealed that values and ideas of Africanist scholars identify as characteristically "Black" and often bear remarkable resemblance to similar ideas claimed by feminist scholars as characteristically "female." Thus, the significance of an alternative epistemology that challenges all certified knowledge and enriches the understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters resistance (Collins, 2003).

Dillard (2000), an African American feminist scholar, notes that African American women's voices have been excluded from most reified bodies of knowledge and epistemological roots of social science research literature and practice, and can subsequently be viewed as specialized bodies of knowledge. Dillard (2000) explores an endarkened feminist epistemology in research to help articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black Feminist Thought, suggesting that language serves as a deliberate and powerful tool to unmask the traditional, political and cultural constructions of marginalized people. Dillard (2000) asserts that language itself is epistemic, in that it provides a way for persons to understand their reality. Therefore, in transforming that reality the language used to define and describe phenomena must be able to do something towards transforming particular ways of knowing and producing knowledge (Dillard, 2000).

Through a narrative research approach Dillard (2000) explores the explicit cultural standpoints, the relationships of power, the contexts of opportunity (or lack thereof), and the emphasis of epistemological roots and their meanings in the lives of Black women researchers. Dillard (2000) uses narratives to explore life notes of three

prominent African-American women research leaders. These narratives undergirded with an endarkened feminist epistemology help to demystify African American feminist ways of knowing, in moments of reflection, relation, and resistance, further understanding Black women's spaces where one can know who we are when we are most us (Dillard, 2000). While Dillard builds on the confluence of the aesthetic, women, and cultural sensibilities which often becomes diluted in traditional modes of representation and discourses due to a lack of translation from one context to the other. Dillard (2000) also expands on alternate ways of expression of self-definition and validation of Black women understandings and knowledge production.

As such this study uses four tenets of knowledge validation to understand the lived experiences of Black women superintendents and aspiring superintendents. Collins (2003) theorizes them as: (1) criterion of meaning, in which Black women value their own concrete experiences and those of other Black women to assess knowledge claims; (2) the use of dialogue, which positions Black women in the center of their own analysis and discourse in validating knowledge claims by way of connectedness through meaningful relationships; (3) the ethic of caring, which contends that Black women are unique individuals who express emotions that ensue validity in their knowledge claims, and they invoke empathy for one another's positions; and (4) the ethic of personal accountability, it is essential for individuals to have a personal stance on issues and assume full responsibility for arguing their validity. These four tenets are used as a historical purview to understand the experiences and narratives of the participants in the study.

The study also includes contemporary feminist notions of claims to knowledge predicated on Collins (1986) *Black Feminist Thought*. Contemporary scholars Cooper (2015) and Nash (2019) contend that Black Feminist Thought has been largely relegated to the role of remedy in the discipline of women's studies. Black women's primary edifice in the academy is to remedy or further rescue the field from itself, where Black women are seen as a finite source, then at the point of reconfiguration, Black feminism no longer becomes vital or necessary (Anderson, 2020; Guy-Sheftall, 1995, 2008). These contemporary considerations are viewed as a hurdle one must get past on the way to more critical questions in building new knowledge. New knowledge forces Black feminist scholars to "ask new epistemological questions and engage in new theoretical and methodological practices to answer them" (Collins, 2016, p. 134). Although Black women have reached unprecedented visibility in the social institutions that have historically excluded them, Collins (2016) addresses Black Feminist Thought's standing amid the current period of reconfigured race relations and racial meanings, and concludes that Black women's visibility does not equal power. Therefore, understanding the experiences of Black women in their pursuit to positions such as superintendent whilst navigating and negotiating their multiple, intersectional identities is necessary for educational leadership scholarship for and by Black women.

Further, the issues of Black feminism and Womanist thought have been placed front and center in the contemporary struggle for Black liberation (Guy-Sheftall, 2008; Taylor, 2017). Ongoing debates exist concerning whether a woman's standpoint should be named womanism or whether Black feminism reflects the basic challenge of accommodating diversity among Black women (Brewer, 2020; Dillard, 2016; Gaither,

2020; Rosser-Mims, 2010). In her acclaimed volume of essays, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker (1983) introduces four meanings of the term “womanist.”

According to Walker’s first definition, a “womanist” is a “Black feminist or feminist of color” (p. xi). Walker further delineates the idea of Womanism that “Black feminism is to Womanism as lavender is to purple” (p. xii), suggesting that feminism is an idea beneath a much larger ideological spectrum of womanism. Fundamentally rooted in Patricia Hill Collins’ Black Feminist Theory, historical womanism focuses on the unique formulation of Black feminism with an intersectional analysis of race, gender, class, and sexual exploitation (Coleman, 2013; Rousseau, 2013).

Black feminism, as well as womanism, have long explored the unique position of Black women and elucidated the intersectional lens through which to formulate analyses of multiple and interconnected oppressions (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Rosseau, 2013).

According to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2017), the radical sensibilities of Black feminist radicals today and the practice of freedom have always been rooted in the liberation of all Black people. An example of this sensibility is the Combahee River Collective Statement (1981) assertion that states, “the interlocking systems of oppression creates the conditions of our lives, and as Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (p. 1). Wherefore, understanding the intersections of multiple inequalities that Black women face moves the analysis of experience towards understanding complexity, but also conceptualizes how processes are disrupted that continue to lessen the value of Black women in the realm of education (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Cook & Williams, 2015). To that end, this study explores multiplicative identities, race, gender, and class to

understand Black women's lived experiences, and their construction of knowledge claims of being both, Black and woman through personal narratives analyzed conceptually through Black Feminist Thought. A Black feminist epistemology to knowledge validation is utilized to help frame and ground this study to promote the discourse that examines and explores the experiences of Black women educational leaders. The evolving nature of knowledge production for Black women and their everyday experiences is examined to understand the contemporary intersectional articulations of Black Feminist Thought.

Collins (1989) contends that living life as African American women is a necessary prerequisite for producing Black Feminist Thought because within Black women's communities thought is validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions that intersect. African American women who adhere to the idea that claims about Black women must be substantiated by Black women's sense of their own experiences and who anchor their knowledge claims in a Black woman's standpoint have produced a rich tradition of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1989). Historically, Black women's experiences have been omitted, devalued, and misinterpreted, yet an alternative epistemology connects them to their self-definition and helps to navigate institutional racism, sexism, and discrimination that have and continue to be part of their experiences (Collins, 2000; Gray, 2015). Black women's knowledge production deconstructs dominant ideologies that justify, support, and rationalize the interests of those in power (Alston, 2005; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Mullings, 1997; Murtadha & Watts, 2005). The next section further examines Collins' (2003) dimensions of a knowledge-validation process that are embedded in the everyday experiences of African American women.

Criterion of Meaning

Black women's knowing essentially requires wisdom since knowledge about the dynamics of race, gender, and class subordination has been essential to Black women's survival (Collins, 1989). Black women need wisdom to know how to deal with the "educated fools" (Collins, 1989, p. 759), people they believed could relate abstractly yet lacked concrete or practical knowledge and experience. Collins (1989) posits that Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type, for their devalued status denies them the protections that White skin, maleness, and wealth confer. Therefore, feminist scholars like Jerkins (2018) and Nash (2019) make the claim that women in general are more likely to use concrete knowledge in assessing knowledge claims in their belief that knowledge comes from the experiences of women.

For example, in a study of cognitive development 135 women were "connected knowers" and were drawn to the sort of knowledge that comes from first-hand observation (Belenky et al., 1986). These women felt that since knowledge comes from experience, the best way to understanding another person's ideas was to try to share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas (Belenky et al., 1986). Literature that illuminates *connected knowers* include Elsa Barkley Brown's (1986) essay on Black women's history subtitled, *How My Mother Taught Me to be a Historian in Spite of My Academic Training*. Brown's (1986) work helped her to invoke her own concrete experiences to those of other Black women.

Another example can be seen in the work of Sojourner Truth. An early abolitionist and a fierce proponent of women's rights, Truth invoked practical images from her own life to symbolize new meanings. She deconstructed the masculine

ideologies that asserted women were inferior to men. Truth proclaimed, “Look at my arm!...I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman?” (Loewenberg & Bogin, 1976, p. 235). She expressed that despite her physical appearance and the fact that she could outwork any man when it came to working in the fields, she was still a woman—a woman who had given birth to 13 children and deserved the same treatment as any other White woman (Robinson & Nelson, 2010). In a similar fashion, stories, narratives, and Bible principles are often selected by Black women for their applicability to the lived experiences of African Americans and tend to become symbolic representations of a whole wealth of experience (Collins, 2003). The narrative method requires that the story be told, not torn apart in analysis, and trusted as core beliefs, not “admired as science” (Mitchell & Lewter, 1986, p. 8). These stories are to be held self-evident in the truth of Black women’s everyday experiences.

The Use of Dialogue

The use of dialogue has deep roots in an African-based oral tradition and in African American culture (Collins, 1989; Combahee River Collective, 1981). For Black women, new knowledge claims are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community, rather than in isolation from other individuals (Collins, 1989). Ruth Shays described the importance of dialogue in the knowledge-validation process of enslaved African Americans, “They would find a lie if it took them a year...the foreparents found the truth because they listened and they made people tell their parts many times” (Collins, 1989, p. 763).

According to Collins (2003), many Black women intellectuals rely on the relationships and connectedness to one another through use of dialogue. One author saw the purpose for dialogue as such, “I was interested in oral traditions of storytelling—Afro-American and others, in which there is always the consciousness and importance of the hearer” (Tate, 1983, p. 91). It is noted that when African American women use dialogues in assessing knowledge claims they may be invoking a particular female way of knowing. Women tend to ground their epistemological premises in metaphors suggesting speaking and listening (Collins, 1989). Thus, the role of dialogue for Black women suggests they may experience a convergence of the values of the African American community and woman-centered values (Collins, 1989; Cooper, 2015; Dillard, 2000; Nash, 2019).

Ethic of Caring

The ethic of caring is another dimension in which African American women are described as “talking with the heart” (Collins, 1989, p. 765). Noddings (1984) argues that caring should be at the heart of the educational system. This innately feminist framework emphasizes the differences between the male dominated view of rules, regulations, and abstract thinking and the more feminine, “motherly” voice of context that seeks connection and relationship in interactions and decision making (Owens & Ennis, 2005). There are three components of the ethic of caring that pervade African American culture: the values placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy (Collins, 1989).

First, individual uniqueness is important and emphasized in this dimension of the knowledge-validation process. With roots in African humanism, individual uniqueness is

illustrated by placing value on personal expressiveness in African American communities (Collins, 1989). Second, emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument (Collins, 1989). A third component of the ethic of caring is developing the capacity for empathy. The emphasis placed on expressiveness and emotion in African American communities, bears marked resemblance to feminist perspectives on the importance of personality in connected knowing (Collins, 1989; Guy-Sheftall, 2008).

Ethic of Personal Accountability

The final dimension of the knowledge-validation process is an ethic of personal accountability. Zilpha Elaw's description of slavery reflects this notion that every idea has an owner and that owner's identity matters (Andrews, 1986). In advancing an alternative epistemology, values lie at the heart of the knowledge-validation process such that inquiry always has an ethical aim (Collins, 1989). An alternative epistemology challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth. The existence of a self-defined Black woman's standpoint using such alternatives to knowledge claims calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth (Collins, 1989). Knowledge claims made by individuals respected for their moral and ethical connections to their ideas will carry more weight than those offered by less respected figures (Collins, 1989; Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey, 1999; Johnson et al., 2020).

The tenets of Black Feminist Thought frame the meaning of the experiences into stories of African American aspiring women superintendents and current superintendents. The analysis of the data collected reveals the associations and disassociations to each of

the tenets framed within the research. The participants' individual and collective lived experiences offer insight to further understand a Black woman's standpoint regarding their perspectives on mentoring in their careers. Therefore, this knowledge adds to the body of literature on African American women in educational leadership. The next section examines literature related to the experiences of African American women managing their intersectional identities while in district and school leadership positions.

Intersectionality - Race and Gender

The origins of intersectionality go as far back as the 1960s and 1970s where social movements were derived from inequities existing within political, social, and economic structures (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Combahee River Collective, 1981; Harlan, 1957; Shoben, 1980). Inspired by Critical Race Theory and Black Feminism, Crenshaw (1988) coined the term *intersectionality* while exposing the inadequacy of antidiscrimination law to address employment barriers and undo racism and sexism that directly influenced Black women in particular (Agosto & Roland, 2018). Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins have worked across decades to define and use intersectionality in scholarship to inform researchers and scholars of how race and gender interact in tandem to expose social marginalization and direct inequities for Black women (Brewer, 2020; Combahee River Collective, 1981; Nash, 2019).

Intersectionality is a tool that researchers can use to highlight the relational aspects of human connections and society (Cho et al., 2013; Steinmetz, 2020). It is one that is underused in not only understanding the inequities that exist in K-12 schooling but the experiences of African American women educational leaders. Given the realities of

intersectionality in the lives of Black women, its examination in educational leadership is warranted (Agosto & Roland, 2018).

For instance, researchers have shared the idea that many African American women view their double minority status, or the intersection of their race and gender, as a barrier to their entrance into the superintendency (Revere, 1987; Rowan, 2006; Smith, 2010). According to studies conducted by Brunner & Grogan (2007) and Tallerico (2000a), there are generally “more hoops for women of color to jump through on their way up the administrative ladder” (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 112). Multiple studies on African American women in leadership illuminate the dual burden of race and gender (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014; Capper, 2015; Capper & Young, 2014; Cognard-Black, 2004; Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Corbin et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; Grogan, 1999; Holder et al., 2015; Jean-Marie, 2013; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Peters, 2012; Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Skrla et al., 2000; White et al., 2019).

Wiley et al. (2017) focuses on the concept of *double consciousness*, the consciousness of being both African American and woman in their study of understanding the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in Texas. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903,1999) introduces this duality of *double consciousness* in his writings, *Strivings*, as the dual character of unrecognized minority subjectivities and their transformative potential, fueled largely but not exclusively, by racism, he asserted:

That the Negro is born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world...the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...one ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two

unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 10-11)

The authors sought to explore the lived experiences of African American women superintendents and their unique phenomenon in obtaining the position in a male-dominated field. Their challenges, supports, and personal backgrounds were important factors to understand their ascension to and acquisition of superintendent positions. The major themes that emerged from the participants were: (a) the desire to impact others at various levels, (b) the participants' sources of personal strength, and (c) external support systems. Du Bois' assertions of double consciousness echo the findings that self-recognition is a form of cultural recognition and the pervasiveness of cultural identity is important to connecting with other cultural identities in one's own community (Meer, 2018). Their research utilized Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought as conceptual frameworks and the findings gave credence to the experiences in a world that was unique and different from those who were not Black or woman (Collins, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Hence, the overt and hostile actions of the majority do not only result in gendered racism, but also from minority invisibility.

The findings from Wiley et al. (2017) were supported by findings from Bailey-Walker (2018) and Kennedy (2019). Bailey-Walker (2018) explores the experiences of four African American women superintendents in Ohio. Two of the participants in Bailey-Walker's (2018) study identify the barriers associated with both gender and race stereotypes. One participant shared that at any given time, she had to figure out whether the resistance she encountered stemmed from her race, ethnicity or gender, or a combination of both. These studies are consistent and advance the ideas that many Black

women experience, the dual marginalization of race and gender, as being barriers to accessing the superintendency.

Kennedy (2019) explores the marginalization of Black women district leaders through androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and intersectionality. Androcentrism is the common practice of applying a masculine paradigm as the standard (Kennedy, 2019). According to Bailey et al. (2018), the needs of men, their priorities, and values are considered the “gender neutral standard” (p. 307). The effect of androcentrism is harmful, some researchers assert, because while the man gender perspective is neutral and thus can be applied to both genders, women’s perspectives are considered “gender specific” (Bailey et al., 2018, p. 307).

Ethnocentrism operates in a similar vein. It is the adoption of a Eurocentric worldview as normative to the human experience (Ani, 1994; Hales & Edmonds, 2018; Kennedy, 2019). Ethnocentrism is problematic because people tend to behave more favorably towards those they place in their culture (Hales & Edmonds, 2018). Ani (1994) detailed the myriad ways in which ethnocentrism has had a devastating effect on other cultures, especially the cultures of people of color.

Kennedy (2019) uses the three concepts to further understand whether they marginalized the African American women in her study. Most of the participants in Kennedy’s (2019) study indicate they believed race and gender factored significantly in their experiences. Many shared that they were subjected to a level of public scrutiny and personal attacks not afforded to their White counterparts. They also share that combatting negative stereotypes regarding African American women was constant. The participants attribute their refusal to internalize the negative intersectionality of race and gender to

their success. As a result, while the marginalization exists African American women have persistently found ways to overcome the adversities that they encounter.

The findings from Kennedy (2019) align with findings from Brown's (2018) study on five African American women superintendents from the Mississippi Delta region of the United States and Moss's (2019) study that featured eight African American women superintendents in California. Similar to Kennedy (2019), Brown (2018) sought to understand the extent to which sexism, racism, and microaggressions influenced their experiences. Brown's (2018) participants report their belief that they too were subjected to higher norms than White superintendents and even African American men superintendents because of their race and gender. Moreover, the participants report they consistently made concerted efforts to demonstrate their competence.

Moss's (2019) qualitative research design also focuses on the duality of race and gender. Of her three major themes that emerged, the first two were: (1) High Expectations, and (2) Burden of Dispelling Stereotypes. Of the four minor themes, the first two were: (1) Double Standards, and (2) Outperform Colleagues. Her participants in tandem with the majority of the participants in other studies that involve African American women, believed it was incumbent upon them to work diligently to affirm their competence because of their dual race and gender.

In conclusion, these studies (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Brown, 2018; Kennedy, 2019; Moss, 2019; Wiley et al., 2017) confirm the existing literature that race and gender are dual barriers that African American women face in their everyday experiences. The findings indicate that African American women must work harder to prove themselves as capable of performing tasks related to the superintendency. The next section focuses on

literature that includes the impacts of women and women of color in educational leadership.

Women in Educational Leadership

The purpose of this section is to examine literature that focuses on the impacts of women in educational leadership. The historical underpinnings of women in education are explored in the literature presented to provide context on their scarce representation in positions, such as the superintendence. In K-12 public education in the United States, women dominate the workforce of teachers and staff members (NCES, 2018). But, even in the 21st century women are grossly underrepresented in top leadership roles (NCES, 2018). In 2012, the percentage of women teachers in K-12 public schools in the United States increased from 75.6% to 76.3%, and the percentage of women principals increased from 50.3% to 51.6% between 2008 to 2012 (United States Department of Education, 2012). In 2018, the growth was negligible where 76% of women still made up the teacher workforce, and 54% of principals were women (NCES, 2018). These statistics are important because the launching pad for women into senior district leadership roles is the principal pipeline.

Women are still underrepresented in positions of power, responsibility and leadership, despite the growing demand of skills and education attained at varying levels within the workplace (Catalyst, 2020). Reviewing the history of hiring in administration reveals that women who aspire to administrative ranks still remain at a disadvantage (Chadler, 2011; NCES, 2018). While there are more women in the workplace the administrative ranks of most professions still remains predominantly male and predominantly White (Banjo et al., 2020). Women have undoubtedly experienced lack of

access to leadership positions hindered by discrimination and stereotyping (Catalyst, 2020, Insala 2018a).

With 76% of women in the education workforce, the literature indicates ample supply of leadership candidates (Wyland, 2016). School administration programs currently enroll more women than men, but comparatively low numbers of women are employed as school leaders, these enrollment figures indicate for women that aspiration is not the issue—opportunity is (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). The literature calls this lack of opportunity a glass ceiling (Maranto et al., 2018; Wyland, 2016), and therefore diminishes women’s voices from the discourse of women leadership in K-12 institutions since they are not present. The literature discussed includes gender demographics of women in educational leadership. However, it excludes women of color which is explored in the next section.

African American Women in Educational Leadership

This section further details the impacts of the presence of women of color in educational leadership. The review of literature points to the role of mentoring and networking for women of color who attain positions in educational leadership. By the 19th century women became a dominant force in the field of education (AASA, 2015; Clark & Johnson, 2017). Despite their increasing presence in the classrooms, men continued to dominate leadership positions much like today (Wiley et al., 2017). For African American women this was not the case and their presence was not felt until the late 19th century, unlike their White counterparts (Alston, 2000). The entrance of African American women into education was eventually viewed as a sign of upward social mobility (Irvine, 1988).

By 1950, half of the African American professionals in the United States were teachers (Wiley et al., 2017). However, this would soon change after the landmark case, *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which significantly impacted the presence of African Americans in the field of education (Alston, 2005; Horsford & McKenzie, 2008; Moody, 1973; Peters, 2019; Taylor & Tillman, 2009; Tillman, 2004). As schools began to desegregate, the number of Black educators began to decline (Irvine, 1988). Teachers, principals, and even superintendents, who were seen as role models, advocates, and spokespersons for the Black community, were demoted or fired once their students were forced to integrate into predominantly White schools (Alston, 2005; Horsford & McKenzie, 2008; Lyons & Chesley, 2004; Peters, 2019).

Examples are unmistakable in states like North Carolina, Louisiana, and Alabama. According to Brown (2005), between 1967 and 1970, African American principals in North Carolina decreased more than 70% from 670 to a mere 170. During that same period in Alabama, Black principals decreased more than 80% from 250 to 40. Between the mid-1960s and 1971 in Louisiana, African American principals declined approximately 35% from 512 to 363. Due to the lack of teaching positions from school desegregation many African American educators were forced to compete with their White counterparts in the newly integrated schools (Horsford & McKenzie, 2008). Consequently, many African Americans left the field of education, limiting Black students in their ability to find strong role models in their schools (Irvine, 1988).

As a single group, Black women are almost nonexistent at the top echelon of public school districts. According to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) (2020) study, at least two-thirds of superintendents are White men, only 27%

are women, and eight percent are African American women. Although, the number of African American women in the superintendency continues to grow, their growth in no way compares to that of White men and women (Brown, 2014). Dillard (2000) states that the voices of African American women are often excluded from research literature.

For many African American women, the challenge of being African American and a woman, in essence, the intersection of race and gender, has forced them into a life saturated with “conflict, confusion, estrangement, isolation, and a plethora of unmarked beginnings and endings, jump starts, and failures” (Fordham, 1993, p. 24). There is an evident need to examine the experiences of these women to understand how they have been shaped by their racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Wiley et al., 2017). While race and gender are noted barriers for African American women aspiring to and currently in the position of superintendent, many face the void of not having supportive mentors and networks that could help to advance their careers. The role of mentoring and networking for this group of women is discussed in the next section.

Mentoring and Networking

The lack of support and access to social and political networks are barriers that women of color report they often encountered in the superintendency (Angel et al., 2013; Bailey-Walker, 2018; Wyatt, 2019). Angel et al. (2013) interviewed 10 Black women district-level administrators in North Carolina who identify hidden criteria and the lack of a peer support network as barriers to entering the superintendency. The participants were aware of the disadvantages they faced due to their race, ethnicity, and gender acknowledging the preferences that stakeholders had for White men. The three participants in Jenkins (2019) study talk about their difficulty pairing with mentors. They

believed having a mentor was key to their ability to be selected to lead a school district. The findings from Jenkins (2019) who examined obstacles aspiring Black women superintendents in Texas faced were consistent with Angel et al. (2013). These studies posit that mentoring and networking can provide a meaningful avenue for Black women in reaching top leadership positions.

Because African American women leaders believe they are often excluded from informal networks (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Davis & Maldonado, 2015), and are doubly ignored or undervalued because of race and gender (Harris-Muhammed, 2020; Jenkins, 2019; Peters, 2010), sponsors and mentors can help them to understand the rules of the organization and leverage them (Cox, 2017; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Sherrard, 2019; Wyatt, 2019). A common refrain in these studies is the participant's identification of importance of official and unofficial mentoring relationships. For example, in Baker's (2018) study, her participants' beliefs that strong systems of support in the form of mentors and professional organizations were integral to their success. This is a distinct disadvantage that many Black women experience since there are so few Black women in positions of educational leadership that can provide additional support in the form of mentoring compared to their other race and gendered counterparts.

The informal networking through professional organizations and others in administration prove to be how the majority of African American women superintendents learn about available positions (Baker, 2018; Brown, 2018; Fields et al., 2019). Participants believed that mentoring was important and served as the socialization for the success of aspiring superintendents (Fields et al., 2019; Wyatt, 2019). According to the

studies mentioned in this section, moving through the career pipeline included some form of mentoring and networking.

Mentoring is a universal concept that transcends across multiple entities including, academia, corporate, and organizational infrastructures (Holder et al., 2015; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; West, 2017a). Of course, the support and access to networks that women of color experience vary across these different levels of organization. In the same vein, research posits that when mentoring does occur individuals are most likely to mentor those like themselves (AASA, 2015; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006; Mondisa, 2018). The next section explores a review of the literature on the impacts of same race mentors.

Same Race Mentors

The discussion of same race mentors has become even more salient as business leaders have attuned their ears to increasing representation of underrepresented groups to leadership positions in the wake of recent national attention from protests, such as Black Lives Matter (Insala, 2018a). As previously mentioned, the majority of mentoring research lies within the corporate sector (Bowling, 2018; Insala, 2018a; Turner-Moffat, 2019; Zellers et al., 2008). To add ideas beyond that, the current social and political climate have increased the call for leadership in corporate America to better reflect the diversity of the nation (Catalyst, 2020; Turner-Moffat, 2019; Ward, 2020).

Researchers have claimed that the lack of Black leadership at America's top companies is a symptom of "the concrete wall," or the hard to overcome barriers that prevent Black employees, especially Black women, from scaling the corporate ladder (Ward, 2020). Unlike the "glass ceiling" White women have to break through, Black

women have to shatter the “concrete ceiling” (Catalyst, 2004, p. 3) to move up that corporate ladder. According to Business Insider (2020), researchers report that mentorship and sponsorship were ways to combat this issue and to promote diversity at the senior level. A sponsor goes beyond a mentor, who may give career advice. A sponsor is someone at work who “serves as an advocate” (Ward, 2020, p.1). Sponsors acknowledge hard work in meetings, mention mentee’s names in rooms they are not in, and can champion them when it comes to new opportunities (Ward, 2020). Professional advocacy and mentoring are two of the most important spokes on the wheel of support identified in the literature.

For example, in a 2004 study by Catalyst, *Advancing African American Women in the Workplace: What Managers Need to Know*, several findings emerged about the interactive effects of racism and sexism in the corporate sector. There were 963 women surveyed and 23 focus groups with entry-level and mid-level African American women in Fortune 1000 companies. The noted barriers that these women faced in business were negative, race-based stereotypes; more frequent questioning of their credibility and authority; and a lack of institutional support.

The researchers further conclude that African American women experienced a “double outsider” status among their colleagues-- unlike White women or African American men--where they share race with African American men and gender with White women. These women reported exclusion from informal networks, and conflicted relationships with White women among many other challenges. They reported feelings of the historical legacy of slavery—discrimination based on skin color—which made race a difficult topic for discussion in the workplace. Further, they reported diversity programs

were ineffective and opportunities for advancement to senior management positions in their companies declined over time. They cite as successes, “connecting with mentors and building positive relationships with managers and colleagues, and using their cultural backgrounds to enhance job performance” (Catalyst, 2004, pp. 7-8). These findings remain consistent with current scholarly research (Brookins, 2018; Fields et al., 2019; Hansen, 2019; Jenkins, 2019; Sherrard, 2019; West, 2019) that identifies mentoring as essential to career advancement for African American women.

In a study conducted by McKenzie & Company and Leanin.org (2020), researchers sought to track the progress of women in corporate America. Their data set included 317 companies and over 40,000 people surveyed on their workplace experiences, including more than 45 in-depth interviews that were conducted. Their findings indicate that 38% of senior level women mentored or sponsored one or more women of color. Consistent with other research findings, McKenzie & Company found that Black women were promoted more slowly than any other group of employees and had fewer interactions with senior leaders in which they did not get the sponsorship and advocacy they believed they needed to advance. The disparities that exist within the corporate sector for Black women regarding the lack of mentoring opportunities is also posited in areas of academia (Bonner, 2001; Davis, 2010; Fries-Britt & Snider, 2015; Grant, 2012; Myers, 2002; Strayhorn, 2010). The continued disparities heighten the desire for same race mentors for African American women as seen in the literature on women in higher education.

Researchers have noted that African American women experience intense isolation and marginalization in higher education, which compromises their personal

well-being and jeopardizes their personal success (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; West, 2015). Black feminist scholars suggest African American women should involve themselves in supportive networks that provide the opportunity to connect with other African American women (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; West, 2017a) to provide a safe space to deal with these issues. However, as minorities are disproportionately represented in the academy it is often difficult for those who seek mentors to find those that share similar backgrounds, race, gender, and experiences (Nelson & Brammer, 2010; Johnson et al., 2020).

The under-representation of minorities in higher education creates challenges such as a lack of same race mentors (Chan et al., 2015; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005). Additional challenges include a lack of social and cultural capital which research has found are essential to building supportive networks critical for survival in academia (Chan et al., 2015; Han, 2014; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005). Thus, the need to further explore the outcomes of same race mentoring relationships that exist amongst people of color.

Research studies indicate that Black men and Black women may have different experiences in negotiating access and engagement in academia (Alston et al., 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). The mentoring literature provides much discourse about the differences between same-race and same-gender mentoring relationships (Mondisa, 2018; Patton, 2009; Tillman, 2001). However, according to Rasheem et al. (2018), having a shared identity and interest with mentors is an important element of mentoring relationships, especially for Black women.

For example, Mondisa (2018) interviewed 10 African American Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) PhD mentors, five African American men and five African American women from academia, industry, and non-profit government sectors. The research question that guided the study was: What mentoring approaches do African American STEM mentors use with their African American undergraduate protégés? In their mentorship approaches the findings suggest that, (1) mentors advised their protégés in a way which helped their protégés build a sense of community and feel as though someone cares about them. Mentors approached their protégés with advice that they would provide their own family members, this in turn helped to establish a sense of community and build relationship; (2) men mentors discussed the importance of listening to their protégés, while women mentors acknowledged the importance of listening to and validating their protégés feelings; (3) mentors helped to strengthen protégés STEM identities and efficacy beliefs. This was an important factor in student success and their ability to identify as a scientist or engineer. Likewise, in mentoring relationships, being able to connect and identify with someone of the same race and culture, and who has achieved the same goals can positively impact the mentee's identity (Mondisa, 2018).

Similarly, Young and Brooks (2008) interviewed education leadership professors to understand their experiences supporting graduate students of color. In the same vein, they conclude that color and difference-blind approaches perpetuated inequities and sent negative messages to mentees about the value of knowledge they possessed. In turn, mentees cited mentoring as crucial and valued professors who were responsive, willing to

meet, and provide support. As a result, these students described being better positioned to meet challenges.

Comparatively, in Strayhorn's (2010) study of faculty mentorship of students, he notes that participants describe faculty not just as mentors but as *cultural navigators* throughout the educational and leadership process. Students of color seek out faculty of color as mentors to gain "support, guidance, and mentorship, perceiving those professors as having a unique understanding of their experiences" (Griffin, 2012, p. 32). For these faculty and students, it is a reciprocal relationship that both parties can benefit from (Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005; Johnson et al., 2020) as researchers indicated that in some same race interactions, faculty members can share their struggles and empathize with students. The combined studies Mondisa (2018), Strayhorn (2010) and Young & Brooks (2008), conclude that same race mentors proved to be beneficial for mentees who seek to navigate institutional barriers within academia.

West (2019) conducted a study to investigate outcomes experienced by African American women student affairs professionals employed at pre-dominantly White institutions (PWIs) who consistently participated in a professional counterspace, the African American Women's Summit (AAWS). The AAWS is a professional development program in the United States designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals. West (2017a) defines a professional counterspace as an intentionally designed, culturally affirming professional development experience that directly contributes to the well-being and professional success of individuals from underrepresented cultural groups.

West's (2019) study includes seven African American women student affairs professionals who attended the AAWS at least three times. Many of the participants believed that one of the primary purposes of the AAWS was to connect with women who could be mentors. They note that the AAWS provided a rare opportunity for them to access and connect with African American women who were serving in positions they hoped to obtain in the future. One participant reflected, "it just allows me a chance to just rejuvenate myself amongst other Black women in the profession" (p. 171). Another participant notes the benefit of being able to connect with her peers during the Summit, "...this is a day to really have some time with your sisters, you know, to share information, to empower, to inspire, and to get folks thinking about their own professional journey" (p. 171). Participants also reveal that they developed peer mentoring relationships with other AAWS participants during and following the Summit as opposed to the traditional models of mentorship. The participants discussed the benefits related to the Summit's impact on their professional success and the networking opportunities it provided. Their experiences within this professional counterspace provided opportunities that were not otherwise available to them in their PWIs to garner specific career-related activities such as mentoring, networking, and professional development. This study further concludes that same race mentoring and networking provided far-reaching benefits for Black women that are distinctly different from mentoring experiences of their White male, White women, and Black male counterparts. The next section provides a historical overview of the superintendency.

Overview of the Superintendency

In an effort to coalesce the role of the superintendent this section provides insight to understanding the responsibilities of the superintendency. This section highlights the evolution of the role over time. Given that the role has preemptively been held by White men the literature provides a lens to understand how women historically moved towards the position. Superintendents serve as a school district's chief executive officer (CEO) and they manage the day-to-day affairs (Bjork et al., 2014; Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005). Public education in the 19th century was widely revered to provide a civic education and mold the character of those who would ultimately become leaders of society (Thomas, 2001), and the responsibility of public schooling was reserved to individual states (Kowalski, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2006). Accordingly, rather than a single national system of education, the United States has 50 different state systems composed of more than 13,598 local school districts (NCES, 2018). Historically, local districts have been viewed as the “basic unit of government in public education’s organizational structure” (Kowalski, 2013, p. 74). The state has complete control of school district boundaries, jurisdiction, funding, and defining the power of each local board of education (Bjork et al., 2014).

The position of superintendent of schools has existed in American public education since the mid-1800s (Glass, 1992). Over the next century, the growth of the superintendency paralleled the growth of public schooling (Callahan, 1966), and the evolution of school boards surfaced as the governing body. Tyack and Hansot (1982) purport that during the early days of United States public schooling, “...leadership in public education was often seen as a calling similar to that of church missionary, and in

teachers' institutes, superintendents were sometimes as interested in converting to religion as in evangelizing for schooling" (p. 16).

Men fulfilled the role of the superintendent and traveled from large cities to small towns preaching the gospel of a free public education to White children (Glass, 1992). During this time their roles mirrored secular clergy. They served as role models, spreaders of democratic ethics, and most importantly, builders of the American dream (Glass, 1992). The first formal position of school district superintendent was established in Buffalo, New York in 1837, and shortly thereafter in Louisville, Kentucky the second superintendent was appointed (Grieder et al., 1969).

As public schooling endured changes so did the superintendency. For example, in the late 1800s, the rapid growth of superintendent appointments was a result of widespread school district consolidation; establishment of state mandated, minimum curricula; the adoption of compulsory attendance laws; demands for financial accountability; and calls for greater operational efficiency (Kowalski, 2003). While the nation moved from an agricultural to an industrial economy many people migrated from rural communities and small towns to cities. During the 1800s and early 1900s, these demographic shifts had a profound impact on the size, nature, and complexity of public schooling (Bjork et al., 2014). With the emergence of immigrants, urban centers grew exponentially presenting new, unprecedented challenges for public educators (Bjork et al., 2014). Through these social, economic, and political changes Americans were forced to redefine the purpose of schooling, and subsequently redefine superintendents' work (Bjork, et al., 2014). The needs of public schooling evolved from the original role of schoolmaster with superintendents exerting little to no decision-making authority and the

state board of education making almost all decisions of importance, to superintendents eventually functioning as managing administrators (Glass, 1992).

The role of superintendents provides a framework that reflect the evolution and emerging responsibilities of the profession (Bjork et al., 2014). The first four role conceptualizations emerged during several eras and are described by Callahan (1966), as *teacher-scholar* (1850 to early 1900s), *organizational manager* (early 1900s to 1930), *democratic-political leader* (1930 to mid-1950s) and *applied social scientist* (mid-1950s to mid-1970s). The fifth role, *communicator* (1970s-present), was incorporated into the literature during the last two decades by Kowalski (2001, 2003, 2005, 2006). These roles are briefly examined here to understand the breadth and complexity of superintendents' work as well as define knowledge and skills for effective practice (Bjork et al., 2014).

Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar 1850 to Early 1900s

Superintendents served as master teachers until the turn of the 20th century (Callahan, 1962). As a result of rising industrialization, demographic shifts, urbanization, and an influx of immigrants, school districts served in a way to prepare children to enter the workforce as well as to assimilate them into the American culture (Bjork et al., 2018). Accordingly, superintendents were expected to provide visionary leadership and manage change processes to ensure improvement of student academic outcomes (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005).

Superintendent as Organizational Manager 1900s to 1930

The transition to become true professionals was a struggle for superintendents in the early 1900s (Bjork et al., 2014; Cubberly, 1922). The notion that superintendents should serve as managers was controversial. According to Kowalski (1999), prominent

education administration scholars like Ellwood Cubberly, George Strayer, and Franklin Bobbitt, argued that superintendents should be business managers, and endorsed the industrial management concepts of scientific management and efficiency imposed on school districts to make them run like businesses. As school districts grew and the country became more urban, more efforts were made to centralize control of all management activity (Glass, 1992).

Within a few decades it was recognized that serving as both an effective school district manager and as an instructional leader were not mutually exclusive. Instead, they were complimentary aspects of their work (Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Kowalski, 1999). An example of the superintendent as organizational manager is apparent in the work of Ella Flagg Young who emerged during a time of political, economic, and social unrest after the turn of the 19th century.

Ella Flagg Young. In 1909, Ella Flagg Young was named superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, a major urban public school district, at a time when the city's schools suffered through a period of administrative and political disfunction (Blount, 2017). Young repeatedly proved more than equal to such challenges and quickly rose through the ranks of school and district leadership. In only a few years she became principal of a large grammar school, one of the first women in the country to achieve such a position (Blount, 2017). According to Blount (2017), her school earned the reputation as one of the finest schools of its kind in the city. Young drew national fame during her principalship at the Skinner School (Blount, 2017). A noted education journalist began to profile her in a series of widely circulated articles and speeches, describing her as the finest teacher of knowledge he had ever encountered. Shortly

thereafter, she was promoted to an assistant superintendency, again, one of the first women in the country to hold such a position (Blount, 2017).

Much like some women today, Young faced significant backlash in her work. Some of the backlash came from individuals and groups who feared women were becoming too powerful, significantly overstepping their traditional bounds (Blount, 2018). In spite of the pushback, she persisted as fully as she could while knowing that if she succumbed, it would be a setback for the larger movement of women's suffrage (Blount, 2018). In sum, Young's work contributed greatly towards the women's movement of her time. She opened doors to civic leadership, social empowerment, and education reform for women across the country who would soon follow in her footsteps (Blount, 2018).

Superintendent as Democratic-Political Leader 1930 to mid-1950s

Since 1923, superintendents have considered the lack of adequate financial support as being the most significant challenge they faced (Bjork et al., 2014). During the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, superintendents worked to influence state-level macro political decision-making processes and they orchestrated micropolitics of district-level implementation (Bjork et al., 2018). The nature and scope of these efforts included galvanizing public support for education, lobbying state legislators for adequate budget appropriations, negotiating local tax rate increases and bond issues, interacting with school boards, responding to interest group demands, serving as the spokesperson on controversial public policy issues, and engaging staff in change initiatives (Bjork et al., 2014; Bjork & Lindle, 2001). Turbulence from the stock market crash and ensuing Great Depression changed how superintendents and others viewed their political role (Bjork et

al., 2014). So, it was not a question as to whether superintendents had a political role but rather how they enacted it (Bjork & Gurley, 2005; Kirst & Wirt, 2009).

Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist mid-1950s to mid-1970s

The notion of superintendents as applied social scientists relates to using research and tacit knowledge to inform important decisions (Kowalski et al., 2010). During the post-World War II era, growing public dissatisfaction with social conditions and persistent inadequate schooling for the country's underclass and minority populations emerged as points of contention (Callahan, 1966). The increasing availability of information about the condition of society and public and private-sector organizations exposed myths about who Americans were as a society, and what organizations actually did or did not do (Bjork et al., 2014).

The call to superintendents was to serve as applied social scientists to use concrete data and other information to make decisions about how to improve public schooling (Culbertson, 1981). During the 1950s, the theory movement and its emphasis on empirical data coincided with the rise of an information society (Bjork et al., 2018). Education reformers forced school districts beginning in the late 1970s, to collect an ever-widening array of and increasingly finer grained data (Bjork et al., 2018). This information was demographic, and performance-based and it referenced teachers, students, and aggregate school performance because the assumption was that superintendents would use these data to make informed decisions that would contribute to improving schools through meeting the needs of all children (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Starrat, 1991), and eradicating social injustices (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005).

Superintendent as Communicator mid-1970s to Present

Historically, superintendents emulated practices prevalent in the business industry and adopted many norms and practices like corporate, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). They tended to issue commands in a “top-down fashion, being impersonal, narrowing for informing, instructing or directing, evaluating and influencing” (Thayer, 1961, p. 4). Due to social, economic, and political changes in the United States over decades, citizens’ voice not only increased but also irrevocably altered executive communication patterns (Bjork et al., 2018). Thus, superintendents were cautioned to reevaluate hierarchical forms of authority and adopt relational models of leading and “open, two-way and symmetrical” (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 4) communication patterns.

After the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk*, schools and educators came under great scrutiny from the public, media, and politicians. The report highlighted the mediocrity of American education and stimulated new interest on the quality and competency of public-school administrators, particularly the chief executive officer (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The release of the report called for systemic reform, expanded community and parental engagement, as well as an increased level of collaboration among administrative staff, teachers, and students (Bjork, 2001).

In sum, over time the role of the superintendent has varied and evolved with the growing needs of public schooling in the United States. While the roles have changed over time, the superintendency, since its inception in the late 19th century has been predominantly held by White men (AASA, 2015; Brunner, 2000). This trend continued into the 21st century. Specifically, men have occupied 85% to 96% of superintendencies

during this time period (AASA, 2020; NCES, 2018). Consequently, not much has changed regarding racial and gender diversity (Munoz et al., 2014). However, it is important to note that the research on women and the superintendency continues to increase (Allred et al., 2017; Perry, 2020; Wyland, 2016). The next section examines the literature related to women's experiences on the path to the superintendency.

The Principal Pipeline

Principals are recognized as a credible pool of potential superintendent candidates (Gordon, 2020; Howley et al., 2002; Winter et al., 2007). Historically, the principalship, specifically the high school principalship, has served as the most typical route to the superintendency and this trend continues today (Glass et al., 2000; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Kowalski et al., 2011). Gordon (2020) states that traditionally school boards considered the managerial responsibilities associated with the high school principalship aptly suited for the superintendency.

According to NCES (2018), public schools in the United States employed 90,900 principals during the 2017-2018 school year, 46% of whom were men and 54% of whom were women. About 80% were White and only 11% were Black. These numbers do not come close to reflecting the demographics of public-school children who are 46% White, 15% Black, 28% Latino, and 6% Asian (Barshay, 2020). This lack of diversity in school leadership is often cited by researchers as a contributing factor to the underperformance of African American students (Brisport, 2013; Gay, 2013; Ryan, 2017). Moreover, some research suggests the presence of a Black principal increased the probability of more Black teachers being hired and more inclusive teaching practices which therefore,

benefited students of color in their experiences (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Grissom et al., 2017).

Findings from the literature on educational leadership also suggest instructional management is likely to be strengthened by principals of color who are uniquely positioned to improve teacher retention, especially in hard-to-staff schools (Bailes & Guthrey, 2020). As a result, many minority teachers are likely to receive encouragement to pursue leadership when they work in urban schools under principals of color (Bailes & Guthrey, 2020; Myung et al., 2011). Bailes and Guthrey (2020) and Myung et al. (2011) maintain that such experiences for minority teachers could increase the diversity of the pipeline to school leadership.

School diversity demands a corps of culturally responsive school leaders equipped to dismantle the inequities faced by students of color (Khalifa et al., 2016). According to Davis et al. (2017), researchers can identify “no compelling reason that race and gender representation could or should not be comparable through all stations of educators” (p. 12). Nonetheless, there has been little growth in the racial diversity of leadership nationally (Bailes & Guthrey, 2020).

A Seat at the Table: Moving Towards Parity

Although, women have made greater gains towards representation as superintendents there is still a lack of Black women who hold the position. This section examines both the gender and racial disparities that exist for Black women superintendents. Women make up 76% of the teacher workforce, yet only 27% of public school superintendents are women (AASA, 2020; Perry, 2020). On the other hand,

women's representation in the superintendency has increased, albeit incrementally, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Women Superintendents in the United States

Year	Women Superintendents
1970	1.3%
1982	1.2%
1992	6.6%
2000	13%
2012	24%
2020	27%

Data from American Association of School Administrators, American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study; Glass (2000) Study of the American School Superintendency; United States Department of Education, NCES Schools and Staffing Survey, 2008 & 2012

In 1972, Barbara Sizemore was the first African American woman to be elected to serve as superintendent of a major city's school system. During her tenure, she focused on communities of low-income students and tackled issues, such as abolishing standardized testing for students. Sizemore challenged the status-quo and believed that standardized testing put African American students at an academic disadvantage. Her radicalism led to her being fired in 1975. She later worked as a professor at the University of Pittsburgh. During her time as a professor she studied low-income schools and created the School Achievement Structure program. The program was designed to enable Black students to compete at higher levels of performance on standardized tests. Sizemore changed her stance on standardized testing to fully supporting a system that would help low-achieving schools become successful by integrating the program into their school curriculums. While Sizemore was an African American woman pioneer during this time, adequate representation still has not been achieved among Black women in educational leadership.

Despite the gains in women's representation in the superintendency, disparity still exists given that 50% of the population are women. Furthermore, half of the student population are girls, and 76% of the nation's professional educators are women, however, 73% of superintendents are men (NCES, 2018; Perry, 2020). Women's underrepresentation in school administration continues to generate research interest (Brown, 2015; Edwards, 2016; Perry, 2020; Wallace, 2015) and most of the research on women in educational leadership focuses on women as mid-managers rather than superintendents (Allred et al., 2017; Brookins, 2018). But recent literature has brought more attention to the pathway that women take to the superintendency which is discussed in the next section.

Gendered Pathways for Women to the Superintendency

In the late 19th century when teaching shifted from men's work to women's work, women began to earn appointments to principalships (LeQuire, 2016; Wong, 2019). Although the women's suffrage movement moved them into elected superintendencies and school board positions (Blount, 2018), the career pathway of women to the position of superintendent has always been different and somewhat more complicated (Gresham & Sampson, 2019). For men, the traditional career path to the top position is high school principal to superintendent (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Kowalski et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2017). A common career path for women is that of assistant superintendent to superintendent (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Robinson et al., 2017).

Currently, according to the research, little is known about the early stages of career pathways into educational administration (Davis et al., 2017), and what is known is almost exclusive to campus-level leaders (Davis & Bowers, 2019). To date much of the

research on career pathways focuses on aspiring superintendents from formal preparation to superintendency (Peterson et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 2012; Smith, 2008), and the curriculum and experiences provided through certification programs (Davis et al., 2017; Orr, 2006). The paucity of knowledge supporting the importance and influence of superintendents, as well as becoming one is an inequitable process, therefore a closer examination of pathways into the superintendency is warranted (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

Sharp et al. (2004) asserts that women served in areas of curriculum rather than in the male-dominated roles of human resources or finance. For many women the typical pathway into school leadership was elementary teacher to elementary school principal (Robinson et al., 2017). But the superintendency rarely emerges from the elementary principalship. The majority of positions leading to the superintendency are in secondary schools or central office positions. The next sections discuss three components of the gendered career pathway for women to the position of superintendent. Those pathways are specific to women and include, (1) the instructional pathway, (2) the path less traveled, and (3) the gatekeeper.

Instructional Pathway. According to Sperandio and Devdas (2015), the number of women who hold formal superintendent credentials with instructional leadership experience, in addition to districts' tendency to hire from within the district would suggest a more rapid increase in the numbers of women superintendents. This would also indicate increased access to the superintendency for many women with elementary school leadership experience, since the traditional pathway for men to the superintendent position has been through the high school principalship (Robinson et al., 2017; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Unfortunately, women are still underrepresented at the high school

principal level. The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reports that men make up 67.3% of high school principals.

While earlier studies suggest that women sought out district positions in curriculum and instruction in their path to the superintendency (Bjork et al., 2003; Wyland, 2016), Sperandio and Devdas' (2015) study indicates that women were widening the pathway by seeking district administrator positions. As the traditional route to the superintendency was by way of the high school principalship, women were not being tapped for these male-dominated positions. Hence, the need for women to seek alternative ways to enter the superintendency. Polinchock's (2013) study is an example of this trend. Polinchock (2013) conducted a study using interviews and surveys to gain insight into the factors important in the career planning of women school administrators in the state of Pennsylvania. The study found that women aspiring to the superintendency, specifically those with elementary school leadership positions did indeed seek out district level positions in curriculum and instruction management, thus placing them in better positions to gain access to the superintendency.

Sperandio and Devdas' (2015) findings were consistent with Polinchock's (2013). Their study was situated in Pennsylvania and they sought to determine if women superintendents and assistant superintendents perceived the large number of school districts and potential vacancies as opportunities to advance their careers. The findings noted that career paths to the respondents' current positions were equally varied with no one route emerging as dominant. The participants' accumulated experience came from a range of different positions, assistant principals in elementary, middle, and secondary schools, and positions in the district office. These positions led to assistant superintendent

and superintendent as opportunities arose. Of the 64 respondents, 47 indicated having held the position of assistant superintendent at some previous point in their career suggesting that this was the most advantageous gateway position to the superintendency. The research findings from Polinchock (2013) and Sperandio and Devdas (2015) suggest women have learned to navigate by way of alternative strategies and career paths that lead them to the superintendency.

The Path Less Traveled. The path less traveled for women is that of the high school principalship. Hoff and Mitchell (2008) conducted a mixed-methods study with 404 educational leaders that included 175 women and 229 men from rural, suburban, and urban areas. The purpose of the Hoff and Mitchell (2008) study was to examine the career paths of both male and female school leaders. They found that significantly fewer women than men planned to enter school administration after graduation from college. These findings echoed a study by Young and McCleod (2001) in which none of the women in the representative sample planned to move into administration when they entered education.

However, of those represented in the Hoff and Mitchell (2008) study that did enter administration, men and women agreed that the most likely career path to the superintendency was through the high school principalship, with 65% of men and 67% of women sharing this belief. This is problematic for women considering the relatively low number of women who hold high school principalships. According to Sharp et al. (2004), the role of high school principal is often a stepping stone on the pathway to the superintendency. Similar findings from Bjork et al.'s (2003) study report that women were more likely to bypass the principalship than men. Tallerico (2000b) likewise

purports similar findings and suggests this was because of, (1) bias in the selection of principals that ultimately disfavor women, and (2) the resultant prevalence of women who aspire to the superintendency who end up transitioning from the classroom to district central office coordinator and director roles.

The fact that the path to becoming a superintendent is still perceived as most likely proceeding from the high school principalship reinforces the current gender imbalance and lowers expectations among women administrators in terms of advancement (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). Since women oftentimes do not take the traditional path towards the superintendency they are at a distinct disadvantage. While these studies described the path that women do not take due to lack of access to gateway positions, such as the high school principalship, the following literature discusses their actual pathway to the superintendency.

The Path to the Top Seat. Brunner and Grogan (2007) and Tallerico (2000b) found that women superintendents generally have more classroom teaching experience than their men counterparts. Brunner and Kim (2010), therefore, assert they typically enter their first superintendency at an older age. As related to previous findings, Bjork et al. (2003) found that women superintendents typically came from district level curricular positions rather than as assistant or associate superintendents of finance or facilities.

More recently, a study conducted by Wallace (2015) sought to find out about the career paths of women superintendents and the factors affecting women's decisions to become superintendents. The study reveals that 73% of participants served as classroom teachers, with 71% of those spending 5 to 15 years in the classroom. Slightly more than half, 57% had served as principal, with 32% of those serving at the elementary level.

Approximately a third, 67% had served as either an associate deputy or assistant superintendent prior to securing a position as superintendent. Wallace's (2015) findings were consistent with Kowalski et al.'s (2011) assertion that the general career path to the superintendency is the teacher-principal path.

While their pathway to the top position was often delayed and not a linear path, the top three factors influencing participants' decisions to become a superintendent in Wallace's (2015) study were, commitment to education, opportunity to have an impact on student achievement, and an opportunity to serve the community. In comparison to a 2007 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) study, the top three incentives for women to become superintendents were, to make a difference, leading learning, and compensation (McCord et al., 2008).

The literature on career pathways reveals that a woman's trajectory was not always consistent with a man's. Women were often overlooked for high school principalships (Sharp et. al, 2004), which is a position that more likely leads to the superintendency even though they had more instructional experience as a result of spending more time in the classroom (Kowalski et al., 2011; Stouder, 1998; Wallace, 2015). Women also held more district-level curricula positions prior to the superintendency (Bjork et al., 2003), and were much older (Brunner and Kim, 2010; Wyland, 2016) than their men counterparts when they secured their first superintendent position. In addition, women are often met with an invisible network that keeps those on the outside, mostly women, from entering or trying to advance in leadership. The barrier that the gatekeeper poses is discussed in the next section.

Good Ole' Boy Network. The last component of the gendered pathway is that the pathway of the woman leader was often met with gatekeepers that her male counterpart had not faced (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Boyette, 2019; Connell et al., 2015). Those gatekeepers were typically a school board member, a highly respected retired administrator, or a community advocate. The good ole' boy fraternity often excluded women by virtue of gender (Connell et al., 2015). Women were often excluded from the inner circle of the superintendency based on the values and culture of peers and colleagues (Connell et. al, 2015).

Dana and Bourisaw's (2006) analysis of the literature led them to a similar finding, "because women are not usually observed in the more powerful leadership positions, cultures generally will not consider options of electing or appointing a woman to a position that has always been filled by men" (p. 51). Other studies talked about barriers of gatekeeping that keep women from advancing through the ranks to the superintendency (Boyette, 2019). According to a study by Grogan and Brunner (2005), research supports the fact that there were qualified women who enjoyed the work and had the expertise to lead school districts who were actively seeking the superintendency, however, the gate keepers that is, school board members and search firms were not hiring women at the same rate as men.

Additionally, Tallerico (2000) explores the process of filling the position of superintendent from a gatekeeping and career mobility theory. The purpose of Tallerico's (2000) study was to understand superintendent headhunting from a critical feminist perspective. Headhunting is a concept that was explored in the research and relates to the gatekeeping theory.

This case study was conducted in New York and included school board members, headhunters, and men and women candidates for superintendencies. The case study included 75 interviewees, 37 men and 38 women. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analyses the study revealed that headhunters were able to personally control portions of the hiring process early on, for example, through the initial paper screening. This therefore exerted a barrier for women from proceeding to various levels of the hiring process.

Tallerico (2000) concludes that the invisible, unwritten selection criteria shaped the superintendent search and hiring practices. These unwritten rules involved headhunters and school board members and were: (a) defining quality in terms of hierarchies of particular job titles, (b) stereotyping by gender, (c) complacency about acting affirmatively, and (d) hypervaluing feelings of comfort and interpersonal chemistry with the successful candidate. Tallerico (2000) found there were limits that if removed, could advance women and people of color in the hiring process. Similarly, the school board, another gatekeeper further down the flow channel could open or close access gates for women advancing to the top position. The participants in Tallerico's (2000) study reveal that the intangibles, such as chemistry, connection, or "fit," that asserted themselves in interview settings were crucial to a candidate advancing throughout the interview process. Tallerico's (2000) findings suggest that since most headhunters and school board members were White men that hypervaluing connection and relatability most likely disadvantaged women and people of color more than White male applicants. The findings were consistent with prior studies by Lewin (1951), Riehl and Byrd (1997) and Shoemaker (1991), and a more recent study by Bailey-Walker

(2018) that ascertains there were a combination of factors that presented women and people of color with more access gates in the flow channels leading to the superintendency than those facing White men. Notwithstanding, the aforementioned studies identify historical and emergent research that highlighted gender inequities that women face in the superintendency and barriers encountered in their career pathways to the position of superintendent.

Summary

In conclusion, the literature promulgates that African American women experience many benefits from same race mentoring (Griffin, 2012; Fries-Britt & Turner Kelly, 2005; Mondisa, 2018; Patton, 2009; Tillman, 2001; West, 2019), however, there is much research that suggests that cross-racial mentoring benefits African American women as well (Freeman & Kochan, 2019; Guramatunhu-Mudiwa & Angel, 2017; Hill, 2004). This chapter outlined a review of literature related to the conceptual framework utilized in the study, the impact of women in educational leadership, further the impact and presence of African American women in educational leadership, mentoring, a historical overview of the superintendency, the move towards parity for women superintendents, and the gendered pathways for women towards the superintendency. In sum, this study explores the participants' experiences related to mentoring to deepened understanding from their perspectives.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I outline the research methodology utilized for this study. I used an in-depth, narrative inquiry approach to understand the experiences of mentoring for African American women superintendents and those aspiring towards the position. The underrepresentation of Black women as school district superintendents has led to scant representation in education literature, therefore leaving a void in the literature for African American women's stories and voices. Storytelling has always been a method to converge the paths of Black women who share similar experiences due to the confluence of race and gender. The use of a narrative inquiry approach provided a way to understand the participants' everyday experiences within the context of their everyday existence. I utilized qualitative, semi-structured interviews with eight African American women participants and a focus group that yielded personal narratives. This research sought to answer the following central question: What role does mentorship play in the career trajectory of African American women who aspire to and serve in the superintendency? This study focuses on the experiences, perspectives, and voices of African American women superintendents and central office administrators who seek the role of superintendent. I utilize Black Feminist Thought and contemporary intersectional articulations as a conceptual lens to theorize these women's experiences.

The purpose of this study was to allow those that have been traditionally underrepresented, marginalized, and disenfranchised an opportunity to tell their stories. An analysis of these shared experiences was conducted to inform other women of color

who struggle for access and success in K-12 leadership, specifically the superintendency. This chapter provides an overview of the research design, a rationale for the use of a narrative research approach, a description of study participant selection and sampling strategy, methods to be used to collect and analyze data, standards of validity and reliability, ethical considerations, and study limitations.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups as they ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Queiros et al., 2017; Yilmaz, 2013). The aim of the researcher was to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied (Choy, 2014; Peterson, 2019).

In a review of qualitative research, there were five particular characteristics of the research design that were relevant to my study: (1) researcher as the key instrument; (2) participants meanings; (3) reflexivity; (4) emergent design; and (5) inductive and deductive data analysis (Creswell, 2016; Hatch, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Merriam (1998) argued that the primary instrument of qualitative data collection and analysis is the researcher. The close proximity of the researcher to the research process, according to Salihu (2016), makes issues related to objectivity and subjectivity more prominent. As such, qualitative researchers are encouraged to be ever mindful of the experiences and biases they bring to the research process to remain aware of how the experiences and biases can affect their understanding and interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2002; Salihu, 2016). The participants' meanings relate to how the participants make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world (Atieno, 2009;

Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mohajan, 2018), while reflexivity extends the researcher as instrument. Not only are researchers encouraged to be mindful of what they bring to the research process they are likewise encouraged to make explicit in the research design what they bring as well (Berger, 2015; Gough, 2016). In this case, my leadership journey included being mentored, which sparked my interest in studying other African American women's experiences with mentoring. Second, the researcher must share how their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations. As an aspiring leader, I can relate to the shared experiences of being an African American woman whilst navigating the barriers, biases, and stereotypes that persist for those aspiring towards leadership positions, such as the superintendency.

According to Morgan (2008) and Creswell and Poth (2018), the emergent process is considered a circular process. As new knowledge is generated, research procedures and questions can be adjusted in an iterative fashion in response to what is being learned in the field. There is a continuous back and forth between research questions, framing ideas, potential data sources, and an evolving sense of the problem, each informing the other, making the entire process one of gradual discovery (Knapp, 2016). These emergent aspects are inherent in most qualitative studies (Creswell, 2014; Morgan, 2008).

The goal of this research is to provide an analysis of the development, advancement, and influence of mentorship that Black women have experienced in their career trajectories towards the role of the superintendent. Qualitative research is ideal because it is designed to elicit the meaning of experiences of a phenomenon based on the perspectives of those who lived it – meanings that are difficult to quantify with statistical analysis (Atieno, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yilmaz, 2013). According to King

and Ferguson (2011), it is important for women, particularly African American women, to understand their life stories and experiences through the eyes of those women before them. Therefore, it is vital to explore the leadership successes, barriers, and experiences of Black women leaders in a way that illuminates their stories given their collective marginalization (Collins, 2016; King & Ferguson, 2011).

As such, this research design placed central importance on examining the lives and experiences of Black women in leadership who have been traditionally marginalized (Dillard, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Wiley et al., 2017). I sought to understand whether the participants' professional trajectories have been constrained because of an absence of mentoring, and if so, capture the strategies that they used to resist, challenge, and subvert those constraints. Mentoring may be a component that could have played a valuable role in combatting those constraints. Therefore, the best methodological approach to answering the research questions is a qualitative methodology that expands the current research on Black women leaders and their mentoring experiences in K-12 district leadership positions.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is an approach in qualitative research that is used to learn more about the culture, historical experiences, identity, and lifestyle of the narrator (Butina, 2015; Carless & Douglas, 2017; Clandinin, 2013). I was interested in hearing the stories of African American women who have reached the role of the superintendent and of those who aspire to this role, specifically district leaders in central office administration to deepen understanding of their experiences with mentorship throughout their career trajectory. Because the narrative methodology places experiences at the heart of research,

epistemology is knowledge about the experience (Toledano & Anderson, 2020).

Consequently, this research is grounded in an epistemology construed from Black Feminist research inquiry (Alston, 2005; Collins, 2000; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Wiley et al., 2017). In other words, one can make the case that narrative epistemologies for Black women can be viewed as a way to enact meaning and understanding of their everyday existence through their personal experiences—past, present, or future.

Accordingly, this study used narrative inquiry. This method assumes that “peoples’ lives are stories, and the researcher seeks to collect data to describe those lives” (Lawson-Sanders et al., 2006, p. 63). According to Carless and Douglas (2017) and Kim (2016), there are several benefits of using the narrative approach in qualitative studies. First, humans have a natural sense of storytelling. Experiences related as stories “become a tool for meaning-making” (Fraser & McDougall, 2016, p. 1). Second, narratives usually provide thick descriptions through the gathering of in-depth data. And lastly, detailed and in-depth meaning is constructed as participants usually reveal their oral histories in their stories. Glesne (2006) asserts that the narrative approach is particularly well suited for detailing the stories of marginalized groups in educational leadership because their experiences are often compounded with multiplicative identities, that is--race, gender, and class, thus challenging and questioning the dominant White male, Western research ethos.

A Black feminist presence in literature has opened doors to contemporary Black feminism as the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by matriarchs (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1981). According to the Combahee River Collective Statement (1981), “We are all damaged people merely by

virtue of being Black women. We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women” (p. 7). Collins (2008) contends to manage intersectional analyses dynamic centering and relational thinking as useful. Dynamic centering places two or more entities at the center of analysis to get a closer look at their mutual construction (Collins, 2008). Relational thinking asks how categories mutually construct one another as systems of power (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Thus, by utilizing a narrative approach, the researcher gains an understanding that nurtures a sense of continuity and identity (Alasuutari, 1997; Amoah, 2013; McAdams, 1993), connects with others (Fraser & McDougall, 2016; Gergen & Gergen, 1988), learns about the culture of those sharing their stories (Cox, 2017; Kenyon & Randall, 1997) and adjusts behaviors based on the experiences of Black women who have navigated the pathway to the superintendency.

In narrative inquiry, the personal story is used as the center of the study to create a more holistic and embodied picture (Chase, 2011; Glesne, 2016). According to Mahari de Silva et al. (2018), the picture is created through the shaping or ordering of experiences. Moen (2006) further explains that there are three claims that researchers posit for a narrative research approach: (1) human beings organize their experiences of the world into narratives; (2) stories that are told depend on the individual’s past and present experiences, their values, the audience that the stories are being told to, and the settings in which the stories are being told; and (3) there are a multitude of voices that are present within an individual’s story. Thus, creating a narrative is primarily a process that organizes human experiences into meaningful episodes (Chase, 2011; Glesne, 2016; Moen, 2006).

Since the majority of the educational leadership literature for so long principally reflected a discourse that centered on the white male-dominated experience, voices and stories of Black women were not in abundance (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1989; Denis, 2008; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Stitt & Happel-Parkins, 2019). Accordingly, this research approach further raises the consciousness of racial and gender discourses regarding leadership and mentoring. These voices and experiences hold weight in positioning Black women at the forefront of their own plights of oppression (Collins, 1986, 2009). Narrative research is an ongoing hermeneutic process (Moen, 2006). Therefore, interpreting these women's experiences was a continual process in that the more I heard, the more I learned, and the more I learned, the more I heard.

Central to understanding Black women's experiences is understanding how race, gender, and class operate conjunctively in their lives. As such, narratives are often used to illustrate the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. For example, Cox (2017), Hansen (2019), and Wright-Bloodworth (2020) use a narrative approach and Black Feminism framework to study Black women superintendents.

Study Participants, Population, and Sampling Strategy

Qualitative researchers tend to work with a small number of participants to explore their lived experiences in depth and in detail (Lukenchuk, 2017), even though there is not a consensus on the number (Dworkin, 2012; Malterud et al., 2016). Rather, this highly selective and intentional process entails establishing rapport with a sufficient number of participants to answer the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I recruited eight participants. These participants included three sitting superintendents and five central office administrators or cabinet members aspiring to the superintendency.

The focus of the study was to learn about their mentoring experiences, therefore, a balance of participants was not a necessary means to explore the participants' lived experiences. This total number of participants was suitable for this study to explore their lived experiences in depth and in detail.

Participants are often selected through purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Sampling methods are intended to maximize efficiency and validity (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). Further, qualitative methods place an emphasis on saturation, for example, obtaining a comprehensive understanding by continuing to sample until no new substantive information is acquired (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The study utilized the snowball technique to recruit participants (Palinkas et al., 2015; Thomas, 2013). This technique involved the "respondent telling the researcher who the next respondent might be, and that respondent doing the same, and so on" (Thomas, 2013, p. 137). The objective of the snowball technique is to identify cases of interest to the researcher from sampling people who know people who generally have similar characteristics who, in turn know people, also with similar characteristics (Palinkas et al., 2015). The snowball sampling technique requires that the researcher asks the first few samples who are selected via purposive sampling if they know of anyone with similar views or situations to take part in

the research. This technique was important to this study because I sought to identify participants who aspired to the superintendency who may not live in the same geographical areas. Therefore, initial recruitment occurred utilizing a demographic questionnaire to determine if they met the study's participation criteria and those individuals who met the criteria were invited to recommend professional peers who also met the criteria.

The criterion for participation included current African American women superintendents who work in either an urban or suburban school district in the United States. The criterion also included African American women who aspire to the superintendency who work in central offices as district leaders in an urban or suburban school district. Their current positions could vary from deputy superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, or managers within central office administration. I received permission from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) to conduct the study since human subjects were involved.

Research Site

I utilized video conferencing as a primary method to conduct semi-structured interviews and a focus group with participants. Due to the constraints of visiting central offices and buildings presently in the age of COVID-19, this served as the best means to exchange information with the selected participants of the study. I scheduled individual video meetings via Microsoft Teams that were recorded with individual consent for each interview and focus group.

Data Collection and Management

The techniques through which narrative investigators collect or initiate the production of narrative data are taken from the familiar toolbox of qualitative research that includes observations, interviews, focus groups, and archival examination, and in doing so they focus on stories (Glesne, 2016; Spector-Mersel, 2010). The data collection method for this study were in-depth interviews and a focus group with the participants. I sent an introductory email to participants that detailed the research study to solicit interest in participation. I obtained informed consent electronically from each participant prior to interviews being conducted. Additionally, the participants were sent a demographic profile questionnaire to provide background information about the participants' professional, educational, and family background. The study included a total of eight participants, three current superintendents and five aspiring superintendents. As each participant agreed to participate in the study, they shared their willingness to participate was because of their support towards the research topic, and their desire to genuinely support me in my efforts to shed light on mentorship for African American women superintendents and aspiring superintendents in the scholarly literature.

During the preliminary phase of data collection, and after initial contact with the participants, I communicated with most of the participants' executive assistants to schedule a convenient time for us to conduct the virtual interview. There were two participants who had last minute scheduling conflicts, so our meetings were rescheduled. They were both apologetic and made it a priority to make time to participate in the interview, sharing that they knew the value of this work and considered their own journeys in their doctoral programs. There were three participants who agreed to

participate in the study and provided informed consent, but experienced scheduling conflicts, therefore, did not continue with participation. Each participant received the interview protocol prior to the interview and was reminded that they could refuse to share information that they were uncomfortable sharing during the interview. No one shared that the interview questions provided a level of discomfort. The participants were informed that all written data would include pseudonyms to protect their anonymity as well as their school districts.

I invited four study participants, two superintendents and two aspiring superintendents to participate in a focus group to further the dialogue and reflection between professional peers on their mentoring experiences, however, only three participants, two superintendents and one aspiring superintendent were able to attend the focus group. The focus group lasted about 90-120 minutes, and it was conducted via remote video conferencing. Questions were explicit in everyday language yet were broad enough to allow participants to provide detailed stories, to ask questions worded to elicit narratives, and included a minimum number of broad primary questions complemented with probing questions (Butina, 2015).

During each of the interviews for this study I utilized a semi-structured interview protocol and took notes during the interview. The interview protocol served as a guide for me to organize each of the open-ended questions with space for me to take field notes of participants' responses during and after each interview. I conducted interviews with all the study participants, including superintendents and central office administrators aspiring to the superintendency. Each participant was asked to sit for one interview for at least 60 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' informed

consent. I used Microsoft Teams as the transcription software to transcribe the data collected. Once transcribed, I listened to the audio recordings to make corrections to the transcripts to read verbatim. The extemporaneous notes taken during the interviews were then streamlined to Dedoose, a web-based, qualitative data analysis software. The transcripts and notes were saved to Microsoft One Drive. Each saved file was dated and named with pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of the participants and their respective school districts.

The stories that were shared and the time spent with the participants proved to be more than a data collection process, but a genuine reflection of each participants' devotion towards the impact of mentorship in their professional trajectories. Many of the participants poured so much into me in such a short amount of time, that the experience proved to be more than research, but a life changing encounter. There were two sets of data collected, interviews with three superintendents, and interviews with five aspiring superintendents. Additionally, the focus group included two superintendents and one aspiring superintendent.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is simply “the process of making sense out of the data” (Butina, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher must immerse themselves in the data, consolidating the data into segments that may provide insight to the research questions. The researcher must then compare those segments and develop patterns or themes in the data. The researcher then interprets what was said and makes meanings from the patterns or themes, which leads to the findings of the study (Butina, 2015; Smith, 2016).

Qualitative researchers work with interview transcripts as the main source of data for analysis, when interviews are the primary source of data collection (Lukenchuk, 2015). The manner in which stories are interpreted is a crucial part of narrative methodology (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Therefore, my goal as the researcher was to listen but to also look for deeper stories and meanings that a participant might not be aware of (Bell, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018). For that reason, according to Butina (2015) narrative analysis may use one of four approaches. First is narrative thematic analysis, the most common approach utilized, in which content within the text is the primary focus. Second is structural analysis, in which the focus is on the way a story is told or put together. Third is dialogic or performance analysis, where the focus is on “the dialogic process between the teller and listener” (p. 193). Lastly, visual narrative analysis, which encompasses visuals along with words into narrative analysis.

I used the narrative thematic analysis process to make meaning of the data collected. According to Butina (2015), there are five stages to the narrative thematic analysis process: (a) organization and preparation of the data; (b) obtaining a general sense of the information; (c) the coding process; (d) categories or themes; and (e) interpretation of the data. The process is discussed in sequential order.

First, the transcripts and field notes were organized according to the participant groups. The transcripts were then assigned pseudonyms and any participant identifiers, like names and locations were replaced or removed. Second, to obtain a general sense of the data, I read and re-read the transcripts. I also read the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings. The next step was coding.

The coding and identification of themes is a major strategy for qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Shavers & Moore, 2019). Coding is a “procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks them down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 30). Further, coding “is analysis...it is deep reflection about, and thus, deep analysis and interpretation of the data’s meanings” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 72). I identified recurring words, ideas, or patterns generated from the data to develop codes. The codes were then uploaded into Dedoose to facilitate placing them into categorical data where they were then grouped as explicit themes (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Shavers & Moore, 2019). Those themes were developed during the interpretation phase.

The interpretation of the data is not a separate process (Butina, 2015). It began at the moment contact was made with participants and occurred simultaneously during the coding and categorizing stages. Interpretation consisted of studying the categories and initial themes to determine how they best represent the meanings given to them by participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1999; Shavers & Moore, 2019). Those meanings were presented as the overarching themes. The recurring themes that emerged during the interviews with superintendents were: (1) career pathway, (2) mentoring as a necessity--two sub-themes derived, (a) the power of the network, and (b) paying it forward, (3) am I one and not the other?, (4) unapologetically me, and (5) know your net worth. Similarly, there was some overlap in recurring themes that developed with the aspiring superintendents. The themes that emerged among the aspiring superintendent narratives were: (1) career pathway, (2) mentoring as a necessity, (3) Black excellence, and (4) the fear factor.

Each of the themes were then organized to construct meaning of the participants lived experiences, more specifically how the themes aligned with the conceptual framework to understand mentoring experiences of African American women superintendents and aspiring superintendents in their careers. According to Tomaszewski et al. (2020), when conducting narrative analysis, the themes construct the meaning of the story and thematic ideas, then connect to develop the narrative within the broader literature and theories. The table below exhibits the thematic concepts derived from the findings and their association to each of Collins' (1990) Black Feminist epistemological tenets which are further analyzed in chapter V.

Table 3

Thematic Concepts and Black Feminist Thought

Career Pathway Am I One and Not the Other? Black Excellence	Tenet 1. Criterion of Meaning
The Fear Factor	Tenet 2. Use of Dialogue
Mentoring as a Necessity The Power of the Network	Tenet 3. Ethic of Caring
Paying it Forward Unapologetically Me Know Your Net Worth	Tenet 4. Ethic of Personal Accountability

Standards of Validity and Reliability

Qualitative researchers strive to ensure that they produce credible, reliable, and valid research (Lukenchuk, 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2019). There are numerous strategies to promote validity and reliability that qualitative researchers can employ to provide evidence their data is valid and reliable (Lukenchuk, 2017). Trustworthiness is

the most widely referenced validation criteria for qualitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1999), the basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple. Once the data was collected, the fundamental questions that I needed to answer were “so what?” and “who cares?” while crafting the narrative accounts of the participants.

Thus, I utilized member checking, a widely used validation criterion in qualitative research (Anderson, 2017). Member checking “involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). Member checking is important to ensure that the participants and their ideas are being represented accurately (Anderson, 2017; Lester et al., 2020). Hence, once the interviews were conducted, I sent the transcripts to the participants for feedback. None of the participants communicated their voice was misconstrued or lacked authenticity.

In addition, I used rich, thick descriptions to convey findings. The term thick description is described as “a highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and in particular, the findings of the study” (Butina, 2015, p. 195). Creswell and Creswell (2018) further explain that when the researcher offers many perspectives about a theme, the results become more realistic and richer. Taken together, the validation criterion helped to provide trustworthiness to the findings of the study.

Researcher’s Positionality

Qualitative researchers are actively involved in their projects as agents in “acquiring knowledge of the processes, histories, events, language, and biographies of the research context” (Thomas, 2013, p. 144). Researchers’ positionality and self as an instrument of inquiry entail their capacity for reflexivity as a validation tool for

qualitative research (Creswell, 2016; Lukenchuk, 2017). Reflexivity refers to “the process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical dispositions, and so forth” it can point to the fact that “the inquirer is part of the setting, context, and social phenomenon the researcher seeks to understand” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 268). Johnson-Bailey (1999) states that although other individuals can interview Black women, Black women talking and interviewing within racial and gender boundaries have benefits because there are fewer margins to mitigate, and this can help the interview be more intimate. This positionality as the researcher definitely posed as a benefit during the interview process.

As an aspiring leader within the K-12 educational setting, I hold many preconceived notions and intense sentiments towards equity and opportunities for African American women who seek positions that are historically male-dominated and where they are grossly underrepresented. Those notions include understanding that there are many more hoops for Black women to jump through as they climb the career ladder. In spite of the knowledge, skill set, or wisdom that Black women bring to their roles they are often undervalued, overlooked, and misunderstood. These sentiments were confirmed in the findings of this study. The conceptual framework applied throughout the research resonated with me as an African American woman who has lived experiences of my own in navigating the systems of inequality and facing barriers that I have encountered throughout my career journey. My approach to this study relied on my personal faith that God would align the purpose of this research with African American women who shared similar beliefs. As such, every single participant shared experiences that included their

reliance on their faith along their career trajectories. These experiences carry a vantage point that undeniably shaped my view towards the study.

Ethical Considerations

First and foremost, researchers have an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the participants involved in the study (Qu & Dumay, 2011). There are two main concerns that lead the discussion of ethics in research, voluntary participation and participant safety (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The participants were informed about the purpose of the study which was outlined on the Informed Consent form. The Informed Consent explained that their participation was voluntary, and participants were required to read and sign the Informed Consent in accordance with the University of Houston's Institutional Review Board. The safety and confidentiality of the participants and the school districts they represented were protected by utilizing pseudonyms. The participants were advised that they have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. The quality of qualitative research and standards for ethics in qualitative research are also interconnected, so that central to both issues are whether the subjective meaning, actions and social context of those being researched is illuminated and represented faithfully (Fossey et al., 2002).

Limitations

Narrative inquiry is not feasible for studies of large numbers and it is "not suitable for investigators who seek an easy unobstructed view of subjects' lives" (Butina, 2015, p. 196). In an effort to fully understand the context of each participant the researcher must collect extensive information about the participant. Therefore, data analysis must be extremely meticulous. The researcher must rely on the assumption that the participants

provided honest and complete answers to the questions asked, based on their experiences of mentoring whilst navigating their journey to the superintendency. The researcher's bias is also considered as a possible limitation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, I gave much consideration and thought when crafting the interview questions and protocol. I also provided transparency in the statement of positionality to help obscure the presented biases.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter III was to provide an overview of the research design and methodology of the study. I utilized a qualitative inquiry with a narrative research approach to gain an understanding of the participants' lived experiences of their mentoring relationships towards their ascension to the superintendency. Qualitative research studies require the researcher to collect data through interviews, observations, or documents. This study collected data through in-depth, open-ended interviews, and a semi-structured focus group with the participants and used a narrative thematic analysis to make meaning of the data collected. The chapter detailed how the data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted. The next chapter discusses the findings of the data.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis and Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of African American women superintendents and those who aspire to the role to understand the impact, influence, and contribution that mentorship has had on their professional career trajectories. The aim of the research is to hear stories and perspectives of their mentoring experiences encountered along their career trajectories. Black women, specifically, have had to overcome obstacles and adversity towards professional success (Assari, 2017). Black women are doubly affected when adversity and challenges are rooted in race and gender differences (Chance, 2022; Corbin et al., 2018).

Through this study, I utilized Black Feminist Thought as its conceptual framework, theorized by Collins (1986) to understand and make meaning of the impact, influence, and contribution of mentoring on the superintendents' and aspiring superintendents' career trajectories. This theory has been widely regarded as a suitable conceptual framework for conducting research on women of color (Amoah, 2013; Cole, 2019; Griffin, 2016). A great deal of qualitative research that centers on understanding Black women leaders experiences is through an epistemological lens, thus a methodological approach frames these studies to empower Black women leaders to participate in knowledge production as they tell their stories (Collins, 2016; Dillard, 1995; Peters & Miles Nash, 2021; Wiley, et al., 2017). The narrative inquiry approach yields individual stories that encapsulates the experiences of African American women

superintendents and those who aspire to the role who shared similar experiences in very different contexts.

The central research question of the study asks: What role does mentorship play in the career trajectory of African American women who aspire to and serve in the superintendency? Additional questions are: (RQ1) What difference does mentoring play in the experiences of African American women leaders who aspire towards the position and for those serving in the superintendency? and (RQ2) What difference does mentoring make on the self-defining knowledge claims of African American women as they navigate race, gender, and class oppressions within their aspirations to the superintendency and career trajectories?

In summary, and in this chapter I provide insight of the narrative accounts of three African American women superintendent participants and five African American women aspiring superintendents. Their detailed stories unfolded through a narrative inquiry approach. Through each unique story I organized the findings of the data according to thematic analysis. First, I presented a description of each study participant which provided background information of the women's educational and career journeys. Second, I constructed an analysis based on each research question and the themes that aligned with the focused research question.

The themes that emerged during data collection were refined according to each participant group--superintendents and aspiring superintendents. It was important for me to distinctly situate the analysis of findings based on each participant group as the lived experiences of the superintendents varied to some extent from the lived experiences of the aspiring superintendents. I outlined each theme and sub-theme to provide narrative

accounts of the superintendents' lived experiences through their career trajectories.

Similarly, I followed the same organization of analysis for the aspiring superintendents.

In the first section of analysis in this chapter, I detail stories related to the role of mentoring and its influence on each superintendents' career pathway based on the following research question: (RQ1) What difference does mentoring play in the experiences of African American women leaders who aspire towards the position and for those serving in the superintendency? There was an overlap in the themes that emerged for both participant groups. The themes were (1) career pathway and (2) mentoring as a necessity. Their narratives comprised in-depth discussions of their leadership experiences to becoming superintendents as well as their lived experiences in the position. As such, the same pattern of organization was utilized for the aspiring superintendents in each subsequent section of findings. Adhering to the same research question, mentoring as a necessity was the next major theme explored for both participant groups. Through detailed analysis, the narratives of the superintendent participants developed two sub-themes related to mentoring as a necessity they were, (a) the power of the network and (b) paying it forward.

In the same vein, I transition to the second research question in the subsequent major section of analysis: (RQ2) What difference does mentoring make on the self-defining knowledge claims of African American women as they navigate race, gender, and class oppressions within their aspirations to the superintendency and career trajectories? Similarly, I detail the narrative accounts of each participant group based on each theme related to the focused research question. This organizational pattern provided a clear analysis of the findings. Albeit, the shared experiences of being an African

American woman were undeniable among the participants, however, the impact of these oppressive intersections were reflected in very different contexts.

The themes that emerged for the superintendent participants are: (1) am I one and not the other?, (2) unapologetically me, and (3) know your net worth. Following the analysis of the superintendents' stories I then describe the lived experiences of the aspiring superintendents related to the above research question. The major themes for the aspiring superintendents are: (1) Black excellence and (2) the fear factor. Further, because of the distinct experiences of each participant group the findings generated varied themes. Therefore, I organized the data to reflect the lived experiences of the superintendents, then subsequently, the lived experiences of the aspiring superintendents. Lastly, the data I gathered provided an analysis related to the epistemological frames and conceptual framework that undergirds the study. The next section provides a description of the study participants.

Description of Participants

The findings depicted in this study represent a small sample of African American women superintendents and aspiring superintendents that span geographically across the United States. The participants and their school districts were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The participants with the exception of one completed a demographic profile to provide the researcher with information of their professional, educational, and family background. The overview of each participant is as follows.

Superintendent Participants

The study included three superintendents who work in geographic regions across the United States. Collectively, they have over seventy-five years of experience in

education and have served less than five years in the superintendency. Their ages range from 40-55. Two of the three superintendents were the first women to lead their districts, and more importantly, the first Black women superintendents to lead their districts. The pseudonyms given to the superintendents are: Dr. Sullivan, Dr. Adams, and Dr. Goodman.

Dr. Sullivan. Dr. Sullivan is the CEO of a large, public urban school district that serves over 130,000 students who are predominantly African American and manages over 20,000 employees. She is divorced and her age range is between 48-55. She holds a doctorate in Educational Administration and Policy. Her educational experiences included attending public schools from elementary to high school in the district she currently leads. She attended historically Black universities for her undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral studies.

Dr. Sullivan has worked in education for 31 years. She started her career teaching mathematics, worked as a math instructional specialist, a high school assistant principal, a high school principal, an associate superintendent for high schools, chief of operations, deputy superintendent for teaching and learning, and current chief executive officer, a position she has held for four years. It is important to note that all positions were held within the same school district.

The interview was conducted virtually and immediately I felt the warmth and spirit Dr. Sullivan exuded through the computer. The backdrop of her office had an industrial look, ceiling to floor windows with natural sunlight beaming overlooking the busyness of the city in the background. Her office was on an upper level of the building, the skyline and rooftops were in the immediate view and background. The industrial

look, exposed ceilings, and feel of her office space was inviting. I could immediately tell she was down to earth, when she said, “I’m going to be honest with you, child-.” The tone of the interview flowed as if I was talking to someone I had known for quite some time. The interview lasted about 90 minutes with Dr. Sullivan sharing very candid stories of her mentoring experiences throughout her career journey.

Dr. Adams. Dr. Adams is the current superintendent of [Deweyville Public Schools] which is a mid-sized, urban school district which serves 31,000 students. The district serves predominantly minority students. She is married and her age range is 40-45. She recently obtained her doctorate in Educational Leadership. Dr. Adams expressed at her initial request to participate that she had recently completed her doctorate and shared a similar research topic.

Her educational experiences included attending public school for grades kindergarten through 2nd. She attended private school during the 3rd through 12th grades. Dr. Adams talked about the inherent legacy of her family as educators and how they represented what she called servant leaders. Her grandfather was one of the first African American principals and central office administrators in her home town. Her mother was a teacher, assistant principal, principal, retired from the principalship, and returned as an interim principal. Her grandmother was her Sunday school teacher, and her brother is a teacher. She talked about the two anchors that she was taught to value: faith and service. Those would hold true and influenced her decision making over the years.

Dr. Adams is in her 20th year in education. Positions she held prior to the superintendency included, middle school teacher, program director for Teach for America, an assistant principal, a principal, an innovation officer, deputy superintendent

for academics, interim superintendent, and superintendent, a position that she has held for three years. Dr. Adams is the first woman, and specifically, the first Black woman to serve as the superintendent of her district. Her prior positions varied across multiple districts. Her pathway was unique in that she left the principalship and took a position in cabinet, which is a unique path towards the superintendency.

When the interview began, she joined the call smiling as I expressed my gratitude for her time to participate in the interview. She was excited to participate and reminded me of her dissertation topic. She had a framed picture with a collage of inspirational words and powerful affirmations on the wall behind her desk in the background. I reminded her that the interview would be recorded prior to the start of the interview. The interview lasted about 90 minutes. Dr. Adams offered words of encouragement about my dissertation process, and she also participated in the focus group which occurred a couple months after the individual interview.

Dr. Goodman. Dr. Goodman is the current superintendent of [Garden Grove County Schools], a large, suburban school district which serves 90,000 students. The school district is very diverse in that over fifty languages are spoken in the county. Dr. Goodman has spent twenty-four years in education and is in her first year as a superintendent, in which she is also the first woman, and specifically the first Black woman to lead her district. Her professional experiences prior to the superintendency were in one of the largest school districts in the United States. She is married and her age range is 45-50. She holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Administration. Dr. Goodman's professional experiences are robust and her accomplishments are unparalleled.

Dr. Goodman is the daughter of immigrants and is a first generation American. She grew up in poverty not realizing that there was another way of life other than what she experienced growing up as a child. She attended public schools in her community and credited her teachers with instilling in her the value of education. She talked about her high school principal and counselor who helped to get her into college. She attributed her being where she is today to educators. Her parents did not have access nor privilege to the systems that promote barriers within education, therefore, she learned to navigate as best she could to get through school. That early success prompted a life of lived experiences that propelled her to servant leadership.

Dr. Goodman began her teaching career as a middle school ELA teacher. Subsequent roles included being an assistant principal, principal, deputy chief of schools, chief of schools, chief officer of teaching and learning, chief education officer. Her mentorship experiences included colorful stories about her journey towards the superintendency. The passion and desire to help others was paramount in every story she shared as I listened intently to every word she spoke. Her wealth of wisdom and knowledge inspired me beyond measure. She talked about her faith and the importance of knowing oneself as essential to her journey of growth and development as a Black woman in the role.

I started the interview and reminded Dr. Goodman that I would record the interview. As the interview began she wanted to know about me and my aspirations. She wanted to know why I chose her as a possible participant. I shared my sentiments about her accomplishments. I expressed my desire to interview her only hoping that she would agree to participate. There were parts of the interview that made me so emotional, and I

expressed those feelings to her. By the end of the interview, I understood that our paths were meant to cross, and that the divine appointment was much larger than the research. The call on Dr. Goodman's life is undeniable and her passion for the work is evident.

The interview was scheduled a month in advance and Dr. Goodman had a last minute conflict which spurred us to reschedule the interview. The interview occurred a week later and lasted about two hours. She shared that she wanted to make sure that we would not experience interruptions so that she could freely give as much time as I needed. I expressed my appreciation of her time. The interview was relaxed and she was very personable. We talked like we knew each other without reservation. Dr. Goodman also participated in the focus group. Dr. Goodman extended herself and reached out to me after the interview to offer words of encouragement towards my progress. She filled my cup so much during both of the interviews by affirming me and my work. She showed a genuine curiosity about my career aspirations. She exhibited an ethic of caring, one of the criterion that the study promulgates for Black women.

The table below provides each superintendent pseudonyms, age range, career pathway, the race and gender of their professional mentors, and information on the base demographics of students served in their districts.

Table 4

Superintendent Profiles

Participant	Positions Held Prior to Superintendency	Professional Mentors
Dr. Sullivan Age Range (48-55)	math teacher, math specialist, assistant principal, high school principal, associate superintendent for high schools, chief of operations, deputy superintendent for teaching and learning	AA Female AA Male White Male

District Demographics: African American 55%, Hispanic 37%, White 4%, Asian 3%, Native American 0.3%, Pacific Islander 0.2%, Two or more races 1%

Dr. Adams	middle school teacher, program director,	AA Female
Age Range	assistant principal, principal, innovation officer,	White Male
(40-45)	deputy superintendent for academics, interim superintendent	

District Demographics: African American 40%, Hispanic 32%, White 22%, Asian 0.7%, Native American 0.1%, Two or more races 5%

Dr. Goodman	middle school teacher, assistant principal,	AA Female
Age Range	principal, deputy chief of schools, chief of schools,	AA Male
(45-50)	chief officer of teaching and learning, chief education officer	

District Demographics: African American 20%, Hispanic 36%, White 28%, Asian 10%, Other 6%

*Demographics based on student enrollment in each school district for the 2021-2022 school year

The next section provides a description of each of the aspiring superintendents who participated in the study. An analysis of the data will be presented that addresses the research questions that the research sought to understand and themes that emerged from the data.

Aspiring Superintendent Participants

The study included five aspiring superintendents who worked as central office administrators or held cabinet positions in their school districts in geographic regions across the United States. They each had a unique career journey in their aspirations towards the superintendency, and had over twenty years of experience in education leadership roles. Their ages ranged from 45-54. Each participant, except for one completed a demographic profile questionnaire which provided me with information about their professional, educational, and family background. I ascertained some of the information during the interview with the participant who did not complete the questionnaire.

I initially asked four of the aspiring superintendents to take part in the focus group. I received responses from two of them that they had other obligations, but they wished me success. The other two aspiring superintendents agreed to participate in the focus group. Unfortunately, the day of the focus group one of the participants who agreed, did not participate, and did not provide an explanation. Therefore, only one aspiring superintendent participated in the focus group. The pseudonyms given to the aspiring superintendents were: Dr. Brown, Dr. Thompson, Dr. Drake, Ms. Myers, and Dr. Rhodes.

Dr. Brown. Dr. Brown is the chief of human resources for a large, urban school district. The district is amongst the top twenty-five largest districts in the country, which serves predominantly minority students. She is married and her age range is 46-50. She holds a doctorate degree in Education Administration and Policy Studies. Her educational experiences included her attending private school for grades kindergarten-5th and public school for grades 6th-12th. She is a product of the current district that she is employed in. Dr. Brown attended a historically Black university for her undergraduate studies, where she majored in psychology.

Dr. Brown talked about how she entered the field of education working as a substitute teacher. She shared that she came from a family of educators and decided to pursue teaching. Her professional experience included, worked as a teacher assistant, a teacher, a special education teacher, a special education coordinator, director of special education, assistant superintendent of human resources, and chief of human resources. Dr. Brown has spent twenty-one years in education and has held her current position for four years. Dr. Brown talked about her desire to be a school principal, although she did

not become a principal she expressed how blessed she felt in each of the positions she obtained as she was asked to step into each role.

As the interview began I reminded Dr. Brown that it would be recorded. Dr. Brown had a pleasant smile and demeanor. She spoke of her faith throughout the entire interview. She expressed her top personality strength according to Gallup strength finders, as restorative. This was important to note because in many of the stories she shared about her mentoring experiences she talked about her need to fix issues around her. She discussed her love of studying the superintendency and following the careers of the big-wigs in the superintendency. She was very inspiring and encouraged me in my professional pursuits. Our connection to our faith was shared throughout the interview, and we prayed together at the end of the interview. This expression showed her authenticity towards supporting me in my journey.

Dr. Thompson. Dr. Thompson is a deputy superintendent in a large, suburban school district located in the western part of the United States. Dr. Thompson has been in education for twenty-nine years and has served in her current position for one year. She is married and her age range is between 45-48. Dr. Thompson holds a doctorate degree in Educational Leadership. Her educational experiences included her attending private schools throughout her childhood. She graduated high school at the age of fifteen and started undergraduate studies at that time. She talked about her mom driving her to college every day because she was not old enough to drive. She described her childhood as one of privilege and emphasized the ideals towards Black excellence that her parents instilled in her.

Dr. Thompson discussed when she graduated college, her father expected her to go to law school, however, she knew she did not want to be a lawyer, so he said, “Why not try teaching?” She started her first teaching job at the age of nineteen, teaching high school English. She would later become an assistant principal, a high school principal, an assistant superintendent of educational services, an interim superintendent, and a deputy superintendent. Dr. Thompson noted that she has been an “only” her entire educational and professional career. In her current district she was the only Black woman for years until she hired the Black women that she can count on both hands. She talked about being the only person in the district to carry the charge towards equity, it’s what has been expected of her, but she explained her stance on why she believed she should not be the face of the work.

As the interview started I reminded Dr. Thompson that I would record the interview. We started with introductions and immediately I was drawn into her art of storytelling. Her personality was so bright and upbeat. She talked me through her childhood and experiences she encountered growing up in the south and how she navigated her entire life being the only Black woman in most spaces that she experienced. Her mentoring experiences were unique and as an “only” proved to her benefit throughout her career journey. The interview lasted about 90 minutes. Dr. Thompson also participated in the focus group, and was sincerely grateful to participate in the collaborative dialogue with superintendents about their shared experiences. She provided encouraging words and said she would always answer the call as she believed it was her responsibility to pay it forward.

Dr. Drake. Dr. Drake is an executive director for employee services and experience for a large, urban school district in the southern part of the country. Dr. Drake has worked for the district for twenty-six years. She is widowed and her age range is 45-50. Dr. Drake holds a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in mentoring. Dr. Drake grew up in a small, rural town and remembered being in school since the age of two. Her mother was an educator and her father was an inspector for the United States government. She talked about the expectation her parents had for her growing up, it was not if you will go to college, but where?

Her educational experiences included her being an “only” in school. She remembered being in class one day reading aloud when the teacher told her to stop. She thought she had done something wrong, but the teacher called other teachers over in to the class to hear her read. The next day she was moved to another class. At that time that was how they tested for G/T, she was moved to what was called an A-level class. That early experience would spark her desire to pursue a career in education.

Dr. Drake started as a high school English teacher, then became a high school counselor, a director of benefits, a human resources staffing director, a director of professional standards, and her current role as executive director for employee services and experience, a position she has held for two years. She described her path as untraditional in her pursuit towards the superintendency. She always thought she would go the assistant principal to principal route, but was presented with the opportunity to go into human resources and has spent fifteen years working in the human resources division.

As the interview began she greeted me with a smile. She wore pearls around her neck and brought a sense of calm in her demeanor. She talked with a southern accent and referenced her faith and gratitude towards God for her journey throughout the interview. I was drawn in to her candid conversations about the work she does and her ideals that we as Black women should lift as we rise. She talked about the obligation that Black women have to mentor and bring others along as we rise towards the top seat. She offered to assist me with anything beyond the interview that I needed.

Ms. Myers. Ms. Myers is an executive officer of specialized learning services in a large, urban school district in the southern part of the country. Ms. Myers' resume is extensive in that she has worked in several states and school districts holding various educational leadership roles. She is a current doctoral student studying specialized instruction and special education policy.

Ms. Myers' educational experiences included her attending public schools during her K-12 schooling. She talked about her first realization towards leadership was when she attended a magnet school that was being rebranded in the district. The learning experiences were project-based before there was really project-based learning. She remembered working in groups and teams often and maintaining roles where she fell in love with being the project manager or team lead. Eventually, that would forge her development into leadership.

She started her career teaching pre-kindergarten and quickly moved into roles where her leadership responsibilities increased. She became a reading recovery teacher, an instructional specialist, a special education instructional supervisor, a director of curriculum and instruction, a director of literacy, an assistant superintendent of

curriculum and instruction, a chief academic officer, a deputy superintendent, and an executive officer of specialized learning services.

As the interview began we talked about my career aspirations and she began to describe her desire towards the superintendency. She has traveled and worked in several districts across the U.S., and she talked about the connections that she has with many sitting superintendents. I reminded her that the interview would be recorded and it lasted about 60 minutes. She was grateful for the extension to participate and provided encouragement and support towards my career aspirations.

Dr. Rhodes. Dr. Rhodes is an executive director of leadership development in a large, urban school district in the southern part of the country. She is married and her age range is 50-55. Education was a second career for Dr. Rhodes as she started her career working in the criminal justice system. She has spent twenty-three years working in education in various leadership roles. Dr. Rhodes holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership. Her educational experiences included her attending predominantly African American K-12 public schools. She explained feeling that she did not have a strong educational foundation from the district where she graduated. She shared that she did not have memories of dynamic teachers, therefore she did not want to attend college. She talked about the discussions she had with her mother about careers and they would always lead back to her needing a degree.

Her career in education began as a third grade teacher, a literacy coach, a curriculum specialist, an assistant principal, a principal, a school support officer, and an executive director of leadership development, her current role that she has held for two years. She has been named a superintendent finalist for two school districts. Her passion

for supporting and nurturing aspiring leaders was apparent during the interview. As she aspires to the superintendency her goals are to be in a community where she can create a shared vision and improve the state of education for marginalized students. I reminded her that the interview would be recorded and it lasted about 90 minutes. She was happy to take part in the study and offered words of encouragement.

The table below provides each aspiring superintendent pseudonyms, age range, career pathway, the race and gender of their professional mentors, and information on the base demographics of students served in their districts.

Table 5

Aspiring Superintendent Profiles

Participant	Positions Held along Career Pathway	Professional Mentors
Dr. Brown Age Range (46-50)	teacher assistant, special education teacher, special education coordinator, director of special education, assistant superintendent of human resources, chief of human resources	AA Female White Female White Male
District Demographics: African American 55%, Hispanic 37%, White 4%, Asian 3%, Native American 0.3%, Pacific Islander 0.2%, Two or more races 1%		
Dr. Thompson Age Range (45-48)	high school teacher, assistant principal, high school principal, assistant superintendent of educational services, interim superintendent, deputy superintendent	AA Female White Female White Male
District Demographics: African American 1%, Hispanic 45%, White 40%, Asian 8%, Native American 0.2%, Pacific Islander 0.4%, Two or more races 5%		
Dr. Drake Age Range (45-50)	high school teacher, high school counselor, director of benefits, human resources staffing director, director of professional standards, executive director of employee services and experience	AA Female White Male
District Demographics: African American 21%, Hispanic 74%, White 2%, Asian 1%, Native American 0.1%, Pacific Islander 0.2%, Two or more races 1%		
Ms. Myers Age Range	teacher, instructional specialist, special education instructional supervisor, director of curriculum	AA Female White Male

(unknown)	and instruction, director of literacy, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, chief academic officer, deputy superintendent, executive officer of specialized learning services	Hispanic Female
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District Demographics: African American 22%, Hispanic 62%, White 10%, Asian 4%, Native American 0.2%, Pacific Islander 0.1%, Two or more races 2%

Dr. Rhodes	teacher, literacy coach, curriculum specialist,	AA Female
Age Range	assistant principal, principal, school support	AA Male
(50-55)	officer, executive director of leadership development	White Male
		Hispanic Male

District Demographics: African American 21%, Hispanic 74%, White 2%, Asian 1%, Native American 0.1%, Pacific Islander 0.2%, Two or more races 1%

*Demographics based on student enrollment in each school district for the 2021-2022 school year

The research questions that the study sought to understand are addressed along with corresponding themes that emerged during the interviews, the focus group, and field notes related to the superintendent and aspiring superintendent participants in the next section. The central research question that guided the study was: What role does mentorship play in the career trajectory of African American women who aspire to and serve in the superintendency?

Research Question #1: What difference does mentoring play in the experiences of African American women leaders who aspire towards the position and for those serving in the superintendency?

The study sought to understand the career pathway of each participant. Understanding their unique career paths allowed me to understand the influences and impacts of their mentoring experiences along their career trajectories. As a result, there were two major themes that overlapped amongst all of the study participants, (1) career pathway along their career trajectory, and (2) mentoring as a necessity. While listening to the stories of the superintendents' mentoring experiences two sub-themes developed, (a)

the power of the network, and (b) paying it forward. The following section addresses each theme in relation to the participants and the aforementioned research question.

Career Pathway

The purpose of this section explores the unique career trajectories of the superintendents and aspiring superintendents. Through each interview it was apparent for me to understand the experiences of each superintendent and aspiring superintendent as they navigated their path to the superintendency. While each participants' path was unique, the findings suggest that some paths were traditional and others experienced an alternative path in their pursuit to the superintendency. As a result, the narratives for each participant group are detailed in the following sections.

Superintendent Participants

This section focuses on the stories of the three superintendent participants along their career trajectory. The first theme career pathway emerged when participants were asked to explain their leadership pathway. The findings assert that the path for each participant was different. While Dr. Sullivan experienced a traditional path towards the superintendency in that she was a high school principal, contrarily, Dr. Adams and Dr. Goodman's paths were considered alternative paths to the seat. The extant literature suggests that most women pursue alternative paths towards the superintendency (Kim & Brunner, 2009; Robinson et al., 2017).

Dr. Sullivan talked about her childhood and the importance of education being instilled in her very early. She came from a long line of educators and education was a value that afforded her an opportunity to pursue college. She stated, "I knew growing up, that college was my only choice. You know, now, students have options. An option was

not even discussed. The only option I had was, which university I wanted to attend.”

When asked what inspired her to move into leadership she stated, control, but further elaborated:

I was an instructional specialist for mathematics and I was working with middle and high school math teachers across the district and, I just found it extremely frustrating that I will go into the classroom, observe the teacher, write down what I observed, take it to the principal, and then I will look up and that teacher would be back there again next year. And I'm like, did you not see what I wrote? Like, they are horrible. Do you see what they are doing to people's children? Then I would go back and look and their evaluations will be fine, like glaring. So, then I figured, well, you're wasting my time. So, I got frustrated and I was like I need to go to a place where I can at least control that narrative. So, I said, I want to just become an assistant principal and maybe then in this one little school that I work in the principal will value my observations and I can help some teachers, teach how they should get to our students. So, that's really how it came to be. I never aspired to be a superintendent, never, ever, it was not, on my list of things to do, never.

Dr. Sullivan captivated the value of hard work and reaping those benefits, and attributed her success to God. She said, “God, reminds me all the time that he is in control, and that I am not. I have worked my way up, it's just how it ended up. I'm grateful for every job I've ever had, grateful for every single one.” Although, Dr. Sullivan never aspired to the superintendency her vantage point with varying roles in the district afforded her the opportunity to experience roles that would give her insight to the inner

workings of the organization. Her path to the superintendency was traditional in the sense that she went from the high school principalship to holding central office positions. According to Robinson et al. (2017), the high school principalship is traditionally the most traveled path to the superintendency.

Similarly, Dr. Adams came from a family of educators and what she referred to as servant leaders. She talked about her grandfather being a huge influence in her aspiring to a position in leadership. She asserted:

My grandfather, I think was a huge influence. He was one of the first Black central office administrators in [Carter Springs Public School System]. He was a pastor of his church for over 50 years, just very well known in our community. He was a very vocal advocate in his younger days. In his 20's he was leading the NAACP, our local NAACP, and integrated a lunch counter and was arrested for that. So he just set this bar, of again, service to others, you know the importance of faith and making decisions in how you lead your life, but also like the power of education. It's something people can't take from you and you use that in order to help make your community better.

She talked about her roles prior to the superintendency and how quickly the trajectory of her career catapulted. She described her professional aspirations to the principalship.

After teaching for three years she knew at some point she would go into leadership, but only aspired to be a principal because she thought she would be a good principal. She too never sought the superintendency, but encountered experiences that led her to the role.

When asked how the superintendency came about for her, she explained:

I was named the interim superintendent in January 2019 and went through the actual formal selection process, and was selected by the board to be the permanent superintendent in July 2019. Prior to that, I served as the deputy superintendent for academics. The superintendent at that time, my old boss announced he was leaving in December 2019. Prior to being the deputy superintendent for academics I was the innovation officer for our district. That was a brand new role that had never existed before to really figure out how to take the best elements of the charter sector and the traditional public school sector and put them together to create partnerships. So, I came into the district to do that job. I went from the principalship into a cabinet role in the district which is actually very unique, and I tell my old boss that was a very bold decision to take a principal and put her on cabinet. Not having had any sort of central office type of responsibility before, so my path is unique in that regard.

She then continued to describe how her pathway was considered untraditional for most who obtained the superintendency. Her former boss and superintendent at the time was a White man who not only served as a mentor, but also as a sponsor. According to Chiefs for Change (2020) sponsors can be particularly valuable for women of color. Without a sponsor, women of color are just not seen. It's not that their work is not credible, but without access and someone lobbying for you, the opportunities are not the same. She discussed the lasting relationship she has with her former superintendent. He affirmed her to see what she did not see in herself and pushed her to consider the superintendency. She talked about him making connections for her even now. She continued to explain her path to the superintendency:

At that time, the woman who was serving as the deputy superintendent for academics, transitioned to another district. He actually initiated conversation to me and was like I need to make a decision about this deputy superintendent role, so if any part of you aspires potentially to the superintendency or would ever be interested in it I want to leave that as an open avenue you might take. If so, then you should be the deputy superintendent because that title and that role will best position you for a superintendency at some point in the future, and so he really left it to me and that was really the first time that I had someone kind of explicitly say you should be thinking about this because I think you can do it. So, basically he was like it's yours to leave it or you know take it, you decide. So I was like, okay, well I'll take it. I didn't know at that point if I wanted to be a superintendent for sure. But I didn't want to just close the door on that opportunity either. So, that was sort of how I came into the role.

The mere fact that she was afforded the opportunity to move into the deputy superintendent role at an ask of her former boss was the setup for her to transition into the superintendency. Her career trajectory was swift and while she never aspired to the role she attributed her positionality a key benefit to her career path. As an insider to the district she proved to be a viable superintendent candidate and her former boss identified that. According to Gullo and Sperandio (2020) the insider career path to the superintendency for women proved to be an optimal career path as women experienced less gender bias due to reputation and familiarity. While the pipeline is often skewed to men (Chiefs for Change, 2020), it was each unique experience that positioned her to attain the superintendency. It is important to note that whilst she navigated her pathway

within her current district she became the first African American woman to serve in the role of superintendent.

Dr. Goodman's path was very different. She did not have the family support nor did she come from a long line of past educators as did the other superintendents. She lacked access and resources that the privileged were afforded to navigate the educational system growing up. Her parents spent a considerable amount of time working to provide a better life for her and her siblings while she grew up in poverty. She did not realize that she lived in poverty until she experienced life beyond where she lived. She described one of the first jarring moments where she understood social class was when she was accepted into a highly, selective magnet high school. It was then when she realized the rest of the world did not live like her.

As challenging and complex that the role can be at times she stressed the importance that every child have a champion or advocate who can help them to navigate the education system. When asked how she entered into leadership she shared:

The way that I ended up going into leadership wasn't because I was so driven, like, oh, yay me, I'm going to be a principal. I was teaching in the classroom, I did go for my Master's and why not educational leadership, right? It just felt like that was the natural next step. If I was going to get a Master's degree it wasn't because I was like, oh, soon as I get this degree I'm going to be a principal, right?

That wasn't it I was open to other opportunities.

As she continued to move through the pipeline towards the superintendency. She described the importance of timing and fit:

So I had really great leaders I have to say throughout my career and that's one of the reasons I believe that I have been successful. I believe I was successful as a teacher because I had an amazing principal and assistant principal who supported me, nurtured me, believed in me, and pushed me. I don't believe that I would have excelled the way that I did if I wasn't, to your point, you said earlier, in the right place. I was in the right place and you can have really great educators and great leaders that are mismatched in their environment, and it defines their career and reputation in a good or bad way. It has nothing to do with them as a leader and everything to do with match and fit and whether or not their style and approach was right for the community or space that they're in.

She stressed the importance of being in the right environment for professional growth. She loved being a teacher, but others noticed her leadership abilities and paved the way for her move towards leadership. During the interview her passion for working with children began to resonate as she described how she moved into her first administrative role. She further explained that she entered leadership not on her own merit, but credited those who mentored her early in her career:

Fortunately for me, I've had amazing mentors throughout my career and it was my assistant principal, who pushed me to be an assistant principal, pushed me to go out of the classroom. So I remember sitting at the cafeteria table and he was an aspiring principal, and so we were sitting there and he said, hey, you shouldn't just stay in the classroom. You should be an assistant principal. I was like, yeah, whatever. I like what I'm doing, I love my kids, and then I jokingly said to him, I tell you what, you go get a school and be a principal and then you make me your

assistant principal. So, we both laughed and he said okay. I'll tell you maybe a year later I was in my classroom sitting at the desk grading papers at the end of the day. The kids were gone and he came and sat on my desk and said, do you remember the conversation we had in the cafeteria, and you told me why don't I go and be a principal and then make you my assistant principal? I looked up at him and he was like well I just got a principalship, and I want you to be my assistant principal.

This would be the beginning of a decorated career that Dr. Goodman would experience towards the superintendent seat. She attributed that her professional journey had been a testament to the mentorship from those who had continuously helped to navigate her journey. From that position she worked alongside her mentor being promoted under his leadership to principal and deputy chief of schools. Dr. Goodman is also the first African American woman superintendent to serve in her current district.

The career paths of the superintendents were an emergent theme that developed while they shared stories of their lived experiences. It is impossible to understand the impacts and influences of mentoring they experienced without understanding the unique path they each traveled. As Black women who attained the superintendent role they expressed challenges, but they each experienced support to help them reach the seat. For the superintendent participants, their pathways were nurtured by those who had traveled similar paths before them. Interestingly, their primitive aspirations were never to attain the superintendency, but their diligence and hard work while working in environments that served disenfranchised students moved them up the ranks towards the position. Their pursuits toward equality and equity for all was prevalent in each capacity they served in.

Aspiring Superintendents

In this section, the experiences of the aspiring superintendents' career pathway are detailed. While the superintendents each experienced unique career pathways a few of the aspiring superintendents also traveled untraditional paths in their career trajectories. For those who thought they would take traditional routes, their experiences led them towards other roles within the organization. As a result their experiences broadened their viewpoints to various roles within the district. The following narratives described how the aspiring superintendents navigated their career pathways while pursuing the superintendency.

Dr. Brown shared experiences that led her towards educational leadership positions. She discussed wanting to take a traditional pathway, in that she wanted to assume a principal role along her journey. However, when she was the director of special education, an opening became available for her to move to the operational side of the district as the assistant superintendent of human resources. She talked about always being asked to move into each subsequent role that she assumed. She discussed her faith and being thankful that opportunities frequently came to her without looking for them. When asked about her leadership pathway she explained how she moved from the educational to the operational side of the organization:

I remember going to my superintendent because there was one particular school in the district that they could not keep a principal. It was a high turnover from principals to teachers, and it was in the summer and the current principal had called and quit at 3:00 o'clock in the morning. I happened to be talking to the superintendent about something, and I said, if you wanted me to go to that school,

I haven't been a principal, but, I've always wanted to be a principal. He said, well, thanks for sharing but, I think I'd like you to try something else. I said okay, and he said, let's talk when I get back. At the time, the assistant superintendent of HR position was vacant, and when he got back in town, he said, I want you to try HR. I said okay so I moved into that position as acting assistant superintendent and before you knew it I loved it and he said let's make you permanent.

She described that being a turning point in her career, one in which she never expected. This trajectory helped to underscore the point that the path towards the superintendency tends to be an alternative path for women. Dr. Brown elaborated on her strong work ethic and how hard it was being a woman who worked on the operational side of the district where there are not typically a lot of women in these types of roles. While she has managed to thrive in her current role she explained that she faced many challenges that her men counterparts have not experienced. As women shift into roles that have been predominantly held for men, such as the superintendency they have to adjust to the cultural norms as they navigate in these spaces. So, learning the written and unwritten rules can sometimes be a challenge when the roles are not traditionally meant for women, especially for Black women to occupy them.

Similarly, Dr. Drake's journey can be detailed as untraditional in terms of aspiring towards the superintendency. She too wanted to become a principal but her path deviated when she applied for the director of benefits position in her current district. She felt like she wanted to try something different never thinking that she would get the job. She talked about getting her insurance license the summer before because she was going to sell insurance on the side. She realized that she could use that knowledge in another

capacity and applied for the job. She said, “First of all, I didn't think I was going to get the job. There's no way they're going to hire this English teacher to be the director of benefits, but I guess you have to be really careful what you apply for because you just might get it. I got it and that job was truly a stretch for me, and I say that because I had to learn things that I had never learned before. I had to deal with so many people that did not look like me because benefits is a very White, male-dominated field.”

Both Dr. Brown and Dr. Drake shared their aspirations to follow the traditional pathway towards the superintendency, but saw their existing paths as opportunities to learn about the operational side of the district in tandem with the instructional side. Superintendents are the managers of the school district, and their business acumen should reflect a range of knowledge and understanding of how the district operates from a fiscal, operational, and instructional standpoint. Both participants expressed their experience in their roles has expanded their purview of the organization, and allowed them to build capacity of human talent from a macro-level to provide effective human capital and processes in their districts.

Uniquely, Dr. Thompson and Ms. Myers have both served as deputy superintendents. The deputy superintendent role is second in command to the superintendent. Interestingly, they expressed that they performed superintendent duties without the actual title. Their experiences were also quite varied as far as roles they assumed which provided a vast perspective of the many facets of the organization. Ms. Myers described her leadership pathway and being adequately groomed to enter the superintendency based on her previous experiences:

I think in a lot of the roles that I've had I don't know if the title really will matter, in some ways it won't matter. For deputy work, we did a lot of what the superintendent did so I think that it's all in what you make it, and how you learn from your experiences and are able to take feedback and reflect. No matter how great of a leader you think you are, there's always room to grow and to improve, and every district is very different. So, you can't just take what you did somewhere else and kind of stamp it. So, I think the key to being a successful superintendent is about being a good listener, and being open and receptive to the community that you're in.

Comparatively, Dr. Thompson expressed her aspirations toward the superintendency and mentioned the work she engaged in her current role as a deputy superintendent being similar to that of the superintendent:

I will say this is part of the reason I am moving towards the superintendency because I'm super-duper comfortable in this position that I have now. I think many people would look at this position that I have now, and be like you don't really need to do anything else. I mean I'm not getting the slings and arrows from the public, the superintendent is getting that. But if people would look at my position they would say you kind of run the district. And yeah, I do kind of run the district. I mean people come through me I do the principal evaluations. I make the decisions on the hirings and firings. I do all of that stuff and the superintendent asks me before he makes a decision. It's nice and people are like you're kind of like the puppet master, well yeah, kind of.

Interestingly, they both shared that the time span spent in each of their subsequent roles was no more than two years. Their trajectory was untraditional in that most women spend longer periods of time in positions before attaining the superintendency (Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Both worked in different states where they experienced different political landscapes that surround the superintendency, which provided an essential understanding in navigating the pathway.

Another example of an unconventional pathway was that of Dr. Rhodes, who started her career in the criminal justice system as a parole officer. It was when a colleague mentioned that he wanted to go teach that she would too decide to enter into education. She taught in the classroom for three years before being approached to move into a role as a literacy coach. She never felt that it was her content area expertise that helped her along her career pathway, but she attributed it to her interpersonal skills:

So, I started working on my Master's in counseling and partnered with our school counselor. I really enjoyed it until my principal came to me and said I really want you to move into the role of literacy coach. There was this new initiative under No Child Left Behind, so he said I really want you to do this. He said I'm going to help you because you'll have to interview, but what I know about you is you have the people skills. I was a third year teacher and here I am getting ready to possibly come out of the classroom to serve as a coach. I always tell people that I wasn't promoted or I wasn't selected to serve in that role because I had the knowledge. I had the people skills and I knew how to relate to people and the other piece was easy.

She discussed how her personal education and interpersonal skills played a role in her progressing along her career trajectory. She earned two Master's degrees along with a Doctorate. Additionally, she shared that she was asked to move into each of the leadership roles she experienced. She is the only aspiring superintendent who was a superintendent finalist twice.

The career pathways of each of the aspiring superintendent participants provided an understanding of the career paths that they chose, yet their stories emphasized that for some, their career paths were chosen for them. While Dr. Brown and Dr. Drake both aspired to the principalship their paths led them to the operational side of the district in human resources. This alternative path provided them with extensive knowledge of the insider path within the district. Contrarily, Dr. Thompson, Ms. Myers, and Dr. Rhodes each experienced career paths that were instruction focused which is most often the pathway women take as they aspire towards the superintendency. Although, each career path was unique as Black women they shared similar but different stories in their roles. The influence and impacts of mentoring on their career trajectories are further discussed in the next section.

Mentoring as a Necessity

The second theme was mentoring as a necessity among the participants. This section emphasizes that mentoring was a necessity to prepare the superintendents for the superintendency while in the role. The diversity of mentors varied for each participant and their accounts of those experiences yielded thoughtful discourse. While they were mentored along their pathway, Dr. Sullivan and Dr. Adams experienced mentorship from White men as well as African American men and women. They detailed the pivotal

points in their careers in which White men sponsored them into position and rank. Dr. Goodman elaborated on her experiences with African American men and women who were at the helm of her success. When women reach senior executive levels, crucial support relationships shift from mentors, who offer encouragement and advice, to sponsors, who take a hands-on role in managing career moves and promoting executives as potential CEOs (Chiefs for Change, 2020; Ward, 2020).

Superintendent Participants

When asked about influences that helped them in the role of superintendent the second theme, mentoring as a necessity emerged. Dr. Sullivan shared, “I stay in constant communication with my pastors. You know when I’m going through, they know, and I’m so grateful for that.” Spirituality proved to be a source of wisdom for the participants. The role of the Black church for Black women leaders in education has been crucial to promoting social justice (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010). She then shared an experience of one of her earlier mentors and the impact it had on her during her formative years as a leader. This mentor was an African American man who happened to be her former high school math teacher:

My earliest mentor that I still converse with to this day was my high school mathematics teacher who really challenged me as a math student. I had the best experience to teach in the classroom next to him when I became a teacher. His gradebook was set up a certain way so I set my gradebook up the same way. You know, he was instrumental. I was so excited after school to go into his classroom and plan. Like, oh my God, I get to plan with Dan. Dan the man that’s what we used to call him when I was in school. He was a great mentor always positive. He

started out as my very first mentor and then I have learned as I've moved up in the organization those mentors change. You don't necessarily leave that other mentor behind but your needs as a mentee change. So you're seeking other people who are either above where you are or who are on the same playing field that you are because they might have those kinds of experiences.

Dr. Sullivan continued to discuss the influence of mentorship while in the role and described her experience with an executive coach. She hired an executive coach when she got in the superintendency and noted how instrumental she was for her in the role:

I have many of my previous supervisors who have been really great mentors. So, they know my flaws and they know my strengths. They know I value what they have to say. I have an executive coach someone that I work with monthly and she tells me about myself all the time. She's a great mentor and I am a better CEO because of it and I strongly encourage it. I think people who think they can do this job without having someone on the outside look in and give them a different perspective are sorely mistaken.

This led to a line of inquiry about what she felt were necessary components for a successful mentoring relationship:

The first one is honesty, trust, then relationship building. None of those two things can happen until you have that relationship building. The executive coach was recommended to me through somebody else. It took us some time to build a relationship and then for me to understand that she only wants what's best for me even though there are times that we butt heads. Then eventually we got to sessions where I felt like, oh gosh, that was a good therapy session. So, it starts

with that relationship building piece and a sense of genuine care and concern about that person. But honesty, transparency, and being authentic are all key to that mentoring relationship. If all you have are always yes's, that's not the best mentoring relationship for you. But you have to know that. You're going to be around a whole lot of yes people, because people just want to please the superintendent. Who wants to be around those people? No one, except somebody who's got a big ole' ego and wants to keep feeding it.

The executive coach was an African American woman recommended to her and Dr. Sullivan explained the importance of her not having to set the table for certain things she has dealt with as an African American woman in the role. She discussed a situation she had with some of the board members who wanted her to mandate that all employees be vaccinated by a certain date or lose their job. She described the discussion as very heated. She talked about the politics of the matter and how the decision would have indiscriminately impacted her marginalized employees. This reference illustrates the lingering mistrust that African Americans felt which stemmed from historically rooted sentiments dating back to failed human trials, such as the Tuskegee experiment. Dr. Sullivan empathized with her employees and this reasoning was the part that her constituents failed to recognize.

During the board meeting, she explained their position of White privilege that they failed to recognize, and explained that most employees who were not vaccinated were the custodians and food service workers, who happened to be African Americans. Further, the board expected her to mandate that they be vaccinated by a certain date or

lose their job. She shared her frustration and then talked about the importance of her mentor being an African American woman who understood the context of the situation:

She's an African American woman and as I talk to other people who have executive coaches I think one, sometimes when you get in this role you're scared to let other people in. So, I think it's easier because you're already scared about letting other people in that it's someone that you feel like you can relate to because you don't want to have to sugarcoat or explain like the whole vaccination situation. So when I went to her I was like, girl, I think I might have come off really bad because this is what I said...so I didn't have to set the table, the table was already set. Let me tell you, just pull the chair up to the table so I can tell you about it. But if it had been a White woman I felt like I probably would have had to set the table. So this way it helps me to be a little bit more vulnerable because I don't have to worry about have I offended the other person that I'm working with.

Black women's ways of knowing and being depicts their leadership. Black women at their foundation are shaped by what they know about themselves. That validation empowers them to connect in authentic ways centering on the truths that ground them. Dr. Sullivan's stance and authenticity provided her the freedom to validate her truth. Dillard (2000) explored the cultural standpoint, the relationship of power, and the context of opportunity for Black women to make meaning in their lived experiences. The epistemological knowledge produced exercised her power and use of dialogue which provided a counter narrative that helped to silence the normative White privilege.

Dr. Adams discussed the necessity of mentoring as she navigated her pathway. She discussed the influence of her family, but also described her mentoring experiences

during the earlier parts of her career. She described a mentor, a former manager, who was a White man who helped to guide her early in her career:

I had a lot of role models, sort of guides along the way, so again I've talked about my family a lot, but I consider those people to have been guides along the way. You know my grandfather who I would call for advice and insight. My uncle, who's also a pastor but also leads a community development association. So he's someone who understands this world and is a leader and is great to talk through leadership decisions, so they've been steady voices for me. I'd say once I got to my job in TFA after I taught for those years, once I got there I had a great manager, actually a White male. He was great in terms of helping me like systematize some of my thinking in the ways that I worked professionally which I've carried with me this entire time.

Dr. Adams continued to describe her experiences with mentors who have been necessary to her development in the superintendency. She discussed other White men and an African American woman who have mentored her as a superintendent:

I do have a group of Black women who are all more senior who've had more experience than me who I lean on a lot. One specific woman, Black woman superintendent, who was my formal coach and I was very happy because we did two years together, and then a couple months ago she was like you don't need me you could call me if you have something going on. But you know you don't need me to coach you anymore. You got this so that was very cool. So, she's played that formal mentorship role and then actually an older White man who I did not know until I started working at [Deweyville]. He was a former superintendent

known in the education world here in [Deweyville], and he and I just ended up forming like an incredibly awesome relationship, so he's also a thought partner of mine. He's just a wonderful man who if I'm on the cliff and about to go off the cliff, I'll call him and he'll walk me off and walk me back. He served on my dissertation committee, so I've had those two people particularly who have been really awesome mentors as I've been in the superintendent chair.

Dr. Goodman discussed mentors that had a significant impact on her development towards the superintendency. She described moving from her teaching role into her first administrative role as an assistant principal. She talked about struggling with the decision to leave her teaching role. Her principal, an African American woman encouraged her to see the greater impact that she would have on children in her community by taking the position:

I felt like I knew what it would be like to work with this particular leader because he had been a mentor the whole time so I made the leap. I remember my principal saying to me she gave me her blessing, and then I said, well, I don't really know if I should do this. I really like being in the classroom I think I should just stay for a few more years, and then she said to me, how many students do you see on average here every day? I said about ninety, then she said, just think about this everything you do in your educational journey should be for the greater good. She said you can impact ninety for the next few years or you can impact one thousand or six hundred or seven hundred. She said if nothing else you remember that everything that you do should be for the greater good. So, I made the leap and I went to be the assistant principal it was incredible. I worked under a dynamic

leader and I learned so much from him and I grew in professional maturity under his leadership. He left I ended up becoming the principal there, he was promoted to be a turnaround principal, and then I was awarded the contract as the principal, and even though he left he remained my mentor.

As a current superintendent she talked about the mentors she relied on for just about everything she dealt with in the role. They are all Black women who are seasoned professionals who either are still superintendents or retired from the role. She described them as being her mentors for very different purposes:

So I have three people who mentor me and they're different types of mentoring. I have someone who is both personally and professionally. I have one mentor who really I go to for personal just me as a woman whatever I may be feeling. If I feel like I've made a bad decision or if I feel like I'm insecure about something, it's someone who's older than me who has the lived experiences both personally and professionally to give me wisdom. Someone who I can be vulnerable with and say, I'm scared. I'm nervous. I don't know if I should do this, I can do all of that. I'm not being a good mom right now. I'm not being a good wife right now. I can say those things with her. I have a mentor who is Doris who was the CEO of [Freedom Public Schools], she's mentoring me in the superintendent role. We have a great friendship, but she is by far one of the best CEOs in this country. She left [Freedom Public Schools] on her own terms and that was like, really boss so I am just so impressed with her. I learned a lot from her professionally the impact of having those lived experiences with her, but then also we have a standing mentorship meeting every week. Before I walked into the role where I am now we

did a couple of transitions where literally I sat with her and she just took me to class, being a CEO, here are all of the traps, here are the things you need to be thinking about, make sure you're asking these questions. I have pages and pages of notes that I continuously go back to, and I learned from her the importance of keeping a journal and writing down your actions, most importantly, writing down your mistakes, so that you learn from them, how you handle a crisis, how to engage in an after action review.

This form of mentorship is valuable in Black women being affirmed in their capacity to work at high levels of efficacy. Black women ensue leadership based on their sensemaking. They acknowledge their standpoint and work to improve the conditions that envelope their communities. Dr. Goodman shared the importance of mentoring and the empowerment from those who have navigated the pathway themselves.

Additionally, some mentoring relationships described developed into personal friendships. This was important for the women who experienced those relationships outside of their professional spaces because they acknowledged their intersections as Black women. These friendships developed into networks of women who share similar experiences while engaging in deeper levels of support with one another. Particularly, Dr. Adams and Dr. Goodman explained the power of the network and managing their day-to-day as Black women whilst in their roles. In the next section, I provide narrative accounts from the focus group where the participants detailed their experiences within their networks of support and mentorship while in their roles.

The Power of the Network. The power of the network emerged as the first sub-theme among the superintendent participants as the discussion emanated from a line of

inquiry of their mentoring influences. This network would prove to be beneficial to these women for a number of reasons. For example, I would learn during the focus group that Dr. Adams and Dr. Goodman were really good friends, unbeknownst to me. They were happy to see each other and caught up with one another prior to the start of the focus group. It was great to witness the power of the connection and it made for a more candid dialogue as they shared their experiences.

Dr. Adams and Dr. Goodman furthered the dialogue on their mentoring experiences during the focus group. They elaborated on their experiences with other African American women who have supported, influenced, and contributed greatly towards their ascension to the role. The network of support from these women proved to be invaluable. While informal and formal networks were discussed they shared their experiences primarily of the informal networks that they each relied on in their roles.

As I continued to ask about the influence of mentorship and the impacts it had on their career trajectory Dr. Adams shared those experiences, but emphasized the power of the network of Black women, and the role it had on her career journey:

I think particularly coming into the superintendency it has been invaluable, like the most valuable thing has been having a network, particularly of women and Black women who I can call on immediately. I'll give two concrete examples. The first, when I was named interim. I mean I had a total freak out. I just remembered someone else I knew some sort of way, I don't even remember how it was connected with Doris Randle, who was Dr. Goodman's old boss, friend, and colleague. I remember getting on the phone with her maybe the Saturday after I've been named and I was just like, oh my gosh, what is happening? I'm so

overwhelmed by this and we're trying to figure out my salary, and I was like this feels like so much money. I don't know if I should take this much money this is just really overwhelming. I will never forget and always appreciate this woman I never met, but she was in the seat, one of the largest districts in our country, who took an hour for me, little ole' me to just help give some guidance and mentorship and partnership.

She shared another example of when she stepped into the role how her mentor helped to guide her personally as well as professionally:

The second is a longer relationship. I have Beverly Watts, who's like OG of Black women superintendents in [Dale County], Florida, who for my whole first year of my superintendency and continues to serve as a mentor who just has such great advice on particular situations and then just pouring into me. One, you can do this. Two, you can do this. Three, I'm here to help you be successful in doing it, and four, how are you taking care of yourself so you can sustain doing it? Those were always the messages she was pouring into me and that mentorship and support network has been invaluable. I would not be able to do this job if I did not have that.

Dr. Goodman discussed her sentiments towards the power of the network for Black women. She responded to the aspiring superintendent in the focus group who shared that she was not fortunate to experience this Black women network that they spoke of due to the lack of Black women leaders or superintendents in her area. Dr. Goodman explained that her connection to Dr. Adams began through a formal network of leaders, Chiefs for Change, where a pipeline of connectivity with other women superintendents spurred their

bond. She explained how the network is built, the power that comes from it, and the need to have a network of people who can help you while in the role:

I'll tell you it's times where you actually feel like, am I sane? And you need somebody that can relate to you and so this idea of having a network is also a way for you to combat not having, a mentor, an African American leader that can be your go to, you can tap into a network, and that's what Dr. Adams was talking about. I met Dr. Adams through Chiefs for Change and I'm just so excited that we met. I think that even if we didn't meet through Chiefs for Change I think the network is so strong. It's really organic where someone says you should meet this person or you should meet that person and then you know, the network is built.

She continued explaining the importance of having a supportive network of people who share similar experiences to help guide you through:

You also need beyond having a mentor or a coach, or both, you also have to have a network of people who are walking in your shoes every day that kind of understand the stressors that you feel. So, you do need that because the role is hard and it doesn't matter whether you're the superintendent or the deputy. I mean the work is just too hard to feel like you're on an island. So, you have to have a network of people that you can tap into just to remind you that one, you're not alone because you know that saying about misery loves company, it's really true. If Dr. Adams is like this week sucked, I had to do this, I'm like, good because mine did too.

The importance of Black women building a coalition to support one another is essential. Dr. Sullivan talked about the field being so male dominated that when she sees

a Black woman who is a superintendent, “It’s almost as if we’ve pledged the same sorority, so when we see each other it’s a desire to want to help, there is no tearing down. It’s like hey, I’ve never seen you before, what’s your name, where do you work, what can I do for you, here’s my number, it’s like an unspoken sisterhood.”

According to Chiefs for Change (2020), a recent study indicates that such networks and the presence of an inner circle of predominantly women contacts are particularly important for women. Women of color often have less access to those networks, and therefore to the political capital they need to advance. Black women develop and engage in these supportive informal and external networks to provide them the validation and support they need (Holder et al., 2015; Mondisa, 2018; West, 2017a).

Paying it Forward. Paying it forward emerged as the second sub-theme as the superintendents discussed their mentoring experiences. This sub-theme aligned with the dimension of personal accountability that Collins (2000) posits in Black feminist epistemology by which Black women have an inherent desire and moral responsibility to help others. When they achieve levels of success it becomes their duty to help others achieve their highest purpose. When the superintendents were asked about the importance of paying it forward to those who may aspire to the role Dr. Sullivan shared:

I think since people have poured into me I think it's selfish if you don't pour back into someone else. I am too blessed God has blessed me all the way through this journey. And if you forget from whence you've come that fall down is going to be hard. But if you always remember then when it's time to leave you're okay with it. Every mentor that has answered my phone call when I called and I'm in distress and I just needed an answer to a question it's the same thing I would do for

somebody else. Has it affected my work-life balance? It sure has. But I also like to go to sleep at night with peace.

Dr. Adams further shared her beliefs on paying it forward and the responsibility she carries:

I also think it is extremely important to pay it forward especially as a Black woman we have to see that as a part of our work and our job and our responsibility. It's not okay for just me to be the first Black woman superintendent in my district in 133 years, I was the first. I know there are women I've met whose shoulders I stand on who could have definitely had this job. So one, it's my job to pay homage to them and to recognize them for helping to blaze the trail. But then it is absolutely my responsibility, but I can't be the last, like I don't want to be the only one today. This is not a position or a title that I want to hold alone. So I have to understand how am I helping to make the road easier for the next person to come along? I don't feel like I have been fully successful unless I can help them get there.

Dr. Goodman talked about her being indebted to pay it forward to others because of the many people who have opened doors for her and supported her along her journey. She talked about her journey to pursue her doctorate while she was in the busyness of working her way up the career ladder. The significance that a doctorate had on her when she was working as the second in command in one of the largest school districts in the country was important. She explained the power of paying it forward when her mentor pushed her to complete her doctoral studies:

Because so many people have poured into me and developed me as a leader for me to be here, I'm in debt and I'm intending to pay back that debt for those who also have to walk this journey. And if there's any way that I can help their journey be lighter and even more successful through my lived experiences, I want to be able to do that because I wouldn't be here if others didn't do it for me. So, I have a responsibility to pay it forward. I wouldn't have Dr. behind my name if I didn't have people like, Dr. Tyson, who in her particular school district made sure that the Office of Research and Accountability actually responded to my email for my IRB. If I didn't have someone pushing to get the letter out for the principals to say, hey, when you get this communication you need to respond to it. Otherwise they could have just been like I don't have time to respond to her survey or send it to my teachers.

She continued to explain how hard it is for Black women to juggle all of the responsibilities in their day to day while still pursuing their dreams. She continued to describe her willingness to pay it forward to other Black women who aspire towards their goals:

Dr. Tyson when she first met me there was no reason for her to take me under her wing. But I remember when I didn't have my doctorate and I was a chief officer and I was supervising those thirty-five schools on the south side of [Freedom]. She was actually a consultant in one of my schools, working with one of my principals supporting teacher development around literacy, and she met me through the principal. I was doing a presentation or something, and she happened to be there at the school. She said to me Chief Goodman, why don't you have a

doctorate? I said, because I keep getting these promotions and I'm so busy and I'm in the program because I was ABD I had everything but the dissertation and I was like, I'm just too busy I don't know when I'm going to write. She looked at me and said you are a Black woman at the top of your game in education, and you will not continue to walk around here without that Dr. behind your name.

She continued to describe her experience with Dr. Tyson and how she made sure that she finished her doctoral degree. She felt a sense of debt to her for all that she did to help her. She described not knowing her from Adam, but the chance encounter she experienced helped to change her life forever. Dr. Tyson explained her own experience to Dr. Goodman when she wanted to quit her doctoral program. But it was one of her professors who told her that she was going to get this degree as a Black woman because there are not enough of us that have it and she was going to get the respect she deserved. She explained without Dr. behind your name you will not get the respect you deserve because we as Black women always have to have more.

Dr. Tyson ended up being on her dissertation committee and supported her to the finish line. She told her when she finished, "Now my job is done, and the next Black woman that needs to get that doctorate degree, you better make sure you pay it forward." Dr. Goodman shared that I was her pay it forward. She said, "So when your email came through my executive assistant was like you can't do this. This is a lot you see all these questions. I said I have to do it. And she was like why, do you see your calendar? You keep saying yes to stuff. I said, Julie I know how hard it is to get this doctorate, this dissertation done and somebody helped me, so I'm going to have to say yes."

While there has been steady progress towards women being represented in the superintendency, there are still few Black women who hold the seat as superintendents. Paying it forward to other women who aspire to the role is a way to combat the sparse representation of Black women in the role. The benefits that women of color feel when they are surrounded with a supportive network of women who share similar backgrounds and experiences helped to navigate their trajectories as they traveled their individual paths together. In the next section, the detailed stories are shared from the aspiring superintendents on the influences and impacts of mentorship on their career trajectories. This proved to be an overlapping theme for both groups of participants. The narratives of the aspiring superintendents are presented in the next section.

Aspiring Superintendents

While each of the aspiring superintendents discussed the necessity of mentorship along their pathway they each described unique experiences. They described their mentors as playing pivotal roles in setting the foundation of their career trajectories towards the superintendency. When asked to describe their mentoring experiences as Black women Dr. Thompson explained that she felt lucky in a way because her career path was laid out for her. Her primary mentor was her former superintendent, a White man who told her when he was hired in the district that she would be a superintendent. She explained how he eventually became her sponsor and made sure that she was well prepared for the superintendency. She described him telling her the types of things to do to be successful in their very conservative district. She elaborated on being the only Black women for many years and how she navigated in that space within the district:

My experiences here are different in that I have not really had Black women who have been available to be mentors for me. I've been the only Black woman in my career for many years and I was the only African American woman as a high school principal. I was the only Black person for many years when I was principal. I finally got another Black person, a Black man, and he lasted a year, and then he was gone.

She then detailed how her mentor became her sponsor and widened the pathway for her to ascend in her career trajectory:

We had those conversations he's like, I know why I'm here. But he had a very long run, he was superintendent for twelve years, and he really was both my mentor and my sponsor. I see those as two different things. He would tell me the types of things that I would need to do in order to be successful in conservative [Falls], and [Falls] is a very conservative city, so there were a lot of talks about just the politics of being in a leadership role, and what types of things that he got away with and the types of things he didn't get away with. We had a good working relationship with the mentorship part. We also talked about how he wanted me to be the face of equity for the district. And I'm like, no, I'm not going to do that. I also called him a sponsor because he was the one who would talk about me and say to others you need to look at this woman. She's amazing and I would get phone calls out of the blue, people from other districts would say, oh, we were meeting with Jason. Jason said we had to talk to you, so I was able to become very well known in our county. A lot of that was because of him. He was on a superintendent's task force and he would bring me to present to all of the other superintendents. So, it was a mutually

beneficial relationship for us and he really did put all of the pieces in place for me to move up through the district.

During the focus group Dr. Thompson further described the importance of a mentoring network and shared that her network was different because it lacked Black women who could provide that level of support:

It's super important and it's been very interesting because I have this network of women, but a network of White women is different than a network of Black women, it just is. I serve as a mentor for a couple of other principals that I've brought along who are African American women and the conversations that we have are just different. So, it's really interesting to hear you say you have to have someone who walks in your shoes because yes, in one way they do understand what it is to be a woman, but what it is to be a Black woman trying to lead is a very different story.

She makes the distinguishing point that the network of White women she is surrounded with differs from what a network of Black women ascribe to. This is a poignant point for Black women leaders because the meaning that Black women make of their experiences unequivocally differs from what any other race and gender experience. In the absence of that network she discussed the need to foster a supportive network of women who aspire towards leadership roles in her district. She described that the experience has been valuable for those women as there are so few Black women in her district.

Dr. Brown explained her desire and willingness to be mentored was to harness her professional growth and development:

I think my experiences shaped me as a leader to make me want to make sure that I give it back to somebody else. I think mentorship is very important, but I don't think it can be something that's forced. People have to want to be mentored and if you don't want to be mentored then that's a whole different story. I think when you have those two it makes for something great. Then, it's a problem when you don't have it. I've just been fortunate to have people who wanted to grow who want to be mentored and then that's just who I am. The one thing about being a mentor is you have to be able to have courageous conversations. You have to be able to say you know that was stupid, right? And not get upset and you have to want to grow and you also have to be able to say goodbye. I think that's the important thing too knowing that to everything there's a time and there's a season. I've been fortunate in my HR roles to have two mentors, a Black female and a Black male.

She furthered explained that both of her mentors were former bosses who when they left their positions she kept in contact with them. She described being able to pick up the phone anytime to call them when she needed advice on how to handle a situation that she may not have had before. She emphasized the importance of the relationship, but also discussed being able to close the door when it's over.

Dr. Drake described mentoring as being critical. She contended that it is not enough to be at the table, but that it is necessary to add value while at the table. She expressed the importance of Black women lifting as we rise, as it is our duty to help others who forge the same path:

I think everybody needs someone that they can say, hey, this is what happened, but how did you handle it? Somebody that's sitting in those seats that you aspire to sit in. I think it's critical because it's a matter of lifting as I rise, that's kind of the way I see it. So, we're all lifting somebody else up. I'm lifting someone and somebody else is lifting me, and it's just a matter of lifting as I rise. So, I believe that getting to that next level is critical and you have to surround yourself with people who not only are like your cheerleaders you need to find someone who would say your name in a room of opportunity because you have done some things. And you have to put yourself in that element. But that's part of the working at it. That's part of the doing more than you're supposed to do, but doing more because you want that seat at the table, and not just to be at the table.

Ms. Myers discussed informal mentoring relationships and the value that she has found in them. She explained an experience where in casual conversation she talked about some of her ideas for the department with her boss. Her boss said to her that she would be great for a position that had been open that she considered, but did not apply for. Her boss arranged a meeting for her to meet with the superintendent. Within twenty minutes of that discussion she had an informal interview with the superintendent and he offered her the position. She shared the importance of staying connected to those who can endorse you and speak on your behalf, she referred to it as informal mentorship. Ms. Myers discussed while aspiring to the superintendency the need to have a close circle of advisers who can help to guide you along your journey as a Black woman:

I think it's very important. I think also sometimes there are people who are really smart that will really be interested in you and they may not be Black women, and

to learn from them along the way because they may be the champion you need to do the next thing. I do love what I'm doing now and it's such important work, but to think about that superintendency, if you step into the role of a superintendent you really need a close circle of advisers that you can really trust because you have two groups of people. The yes men that are just going to go along with everything you say and then you have the hidden back stabbers who are trying to tear you down every minute. You know, just because they didn't vote for you or they didn't want you or they wanted their best friend. So, I think when you get to those levels of leadership it is so critical to have people who can just tell you, who are Black women, but then also people who may have had that experience before who may not be Black women.

Lastly, Dr. Rhodes shared her thoughts on the importance of mentoring and wanting to pay it forward because of the support that she has received. Her current role is one where she spends a considerable amount of time mentoring and developing leaders who aspire to district leadership roles, so she is immersed in mentoring in her day-to-day work.

So my mantra is, I can't pay it back so I pay it forward because when I think about all of the people who have poured into me at every level and what they've done for me, what that has done is made me passionate about doing the same thing for other people. For example, I've been communicating with one of the aspiring assistant principals who was in my cohort who is on her third interview to become an assistant principal. So, when that happens, it's like, okay, we have to have a

plan let's get ready. For me, that's exciting when people are receiving the support that they need to go for those things that they want to do.

Despite each unique experience the findings contend that mentorship for Black women is necessary. For some Black women the lack of mentorship and support produced feelings of isolation. Networks of support where women can engage in their full being is critical to understanding the Black woman's everyday experience. Career pathway, mentoring as a necessity, the power of the network, and paying it forward were all themes that were apparent in the stories shared by the participants.

To understand their explicit lived experiences as Black women navigating the superintendency and the ascension towards the superintendency is pivotal to understanding how mentoring shaped those experiences. The participants described not being able to thrive in their roles in the absence of mentorship and supportive networks. In turn, Black women must seek mentors and search for informal and formal networks that will nurture them professionally and personally in their roles. The next section addresses the second research question in relation to the emergent themes that developed from the participants' lived experiences.

Research Question #2: What difference does mentoring make on the self-defining knowledge claims of African American women as they navigate race, gender, and class oppressions within their aspirations to the superintendency and career trajectories?

As I continued to analyze the data, I sought to understand the participants' meaning of their lived experiences at the intersections of their identities as Black women. As a result, there were three major themes that emerged from the superintendent participants while addressing the second research question, (1) am I one and not the

other?, (2) unapologetically me, and (3) know your net worth. Additionally, there were two themes that emerged from the aspiring superintendents while addressing the second research question, (1) Black excellence, and (2) the fear factor.

Superintendent Participants

In the following sections I address each theme in relation to the superintendent participants and the second research question. The role of mentoring is further discussed as each superintendent makes meaning of their self-defining knowledge claims as African American women superintendents. Their individual and collective experiences are highlighted to understand the multiplicative intersections that African American women leaders experience. The three themes that emerged in the data from the superintendents that addressed the second research question were: (1) am I one and not the other?, (2) unapologetically me, and (3) know your net worth.

Am I One and Not the Other? The first theme developed am I one and not the other? While the superintendents shared their experiences the dialogue deepened to understand the multiplicative identities of the participants and their lived experiences. Metrics of identity such as being a “woman” and being “Black” do not exist independently of one another, thus producing a complex intersection of potential adverse experiences (Chance, 2022; Collins, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). Because knowledge comes from experience the best way to understand another’s experience is to develop empathy and share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas (Collins, 2000; Johnson et al., 2020). Intersectionality provides critical insight that race, gender, ethnicity and other identities “operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p.2).

As the interviews continued the superintendents acknowledged that their experiences mutually centered around them being both Black and woman, and highlighted the challenges they encountered. When asked how being a Black woman acknowledging the intersections of race and gender has shaped her educational and professional experiences Dr. Sullivan shared:

When I finally became a principal, high school principal, once again I stumbled on that because I thought I was going to be an assistant principal all my life. I was in my first high school principal position when the male dominant piece came out. I would go to meetings and it was almost as if women they looked at us like y'all don't have an opinion. There were very few of us. There were four out of maybe twenty-two of us at that time. So, it was an interesting culture and it was almost as if I had to prove that I knew what I was doing as a high school principal in order for them to listen and value what I brought to the table. I almost felt like I was trying out for the principalship, but I'm thinking I go to work every day and deal with the same issues they do and have better results than they do, but here I am listening to them.

Dr. Sullivan pointed out that she often felt like she listened to the White men who were in the same positions as her as she was vying to be seen and heard. However, as a Black woman she shared that her school results were better. Oftentimes, this is the case where Black women are invisible and are deemed hidden figures in their educational hierarchies. Although, the duality of invisibility and hypervisibility plague women in social settings, it significantly affects Black women in leadership positions (Dickens et al., 2019; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). She then described another situation where she was

promoted to the chief of operations role. She talked about her experience being a woman in a role where majority of the employees were men that she supervised:

The only other time was a time when I was in the chief of operations role because it is very male-dominated. The superintendent at the time was leaving to go to another district, and was like Dr. Sullivan you're the only person I trust to get schools open. I really need you over in this operations role and honestly for the first couple weeks I hated it because clearly I loved instruction, but it was by far and I tell him this now the best decision I ever made for my career because it allowed me to see a different side of the organization, which are predominantly men. But those are the times where I felt like a female. My color didn't show up but my being a woman did. And honestly initially walking into some of the rooms I would walk into an auditorium where there are 2,000 custodians and only like a handful of women. The rest of them were men. So, as a woman you think are they listening to me or are they just looking at me? I felt a need to have to work extremely hard to prove that I was the right person for that job.

She further described an experience where the interim superintendent was being named for the district and a colleague, a Black man, informed her that it was rumored that the board was looking at both of them to name as the interim superintendent. He went on to ask her if she would be some role, basically offered her a job if he got the job. She expressed that he never felt that she was his competition:

He was a Black male so that didn't come from somebody else and I'm like dude I look just like you except, I'm female, you're male. It only honestly made me dig my heels in like, oh, I wasn't even trying to get that job but just because you

counted me out makes me want it. Which I was like Dr. Sullivan, you might need to check yourself because you only want it now because you're mad at him. After I got the job which I'm grateful I got it, the chair of the board at the time, he admitted to me over drinks one day that they were seriously considering this guy, but I am so glad we picked you. I said but what was it about him? What experiences did he have that you thought he would be a better candidate? He said I don't know but I laugh about this all the time.

Microaggressions, such as this example of sexism, that Dr. Sullivan describes are common for Black women to experience and often the motivation that spurs them into action. As Black women we are affirmed in the work we do and with that brings a sense of confidence. She later explained to the board chair that her experience was unmatched compared to the other guy. She explained overseeing every division in the school district, except human resources where his resume could not compare. As Dr. Sullivan noted that she had to take him to "school." Therefore, the old hegemony that women are inferior to men in the work they do is one that requires a mind shift in our educational organizations. Studies posit that the intersection of gendered racism in the workplace can result in biases that alter the perceptions of Black women's competencies thus limiting their ascension into leadership (Moorosi et al., 2018; Patterson, 2006; Smith, 2016).

Dr. Adams shared that her experiences in her district were impacted daily by her being a Black woman. She described the importance of knowing who she is and being authentic in that no matter what:

Coming into leadership as a Black woman it's been really important for me to be who I am authentically which can be difficult. That's been important to me

because I've had other Black women you know on my staff or on my team or right now as a superintendent I don't know them all personally, obviously, but it matters that people see me as being comfortable in who I am as a Black woman as I am leading and navigating the world. So, that has always been a conscious thing of making sure I'm comfortable in who I am to the extent that I can.

Dr. Adams described how there is strategy when she knows that her being a Black woman may not carry a message that needs to be portrayed to a certain audience the same as when received from the White male purview. She talked about her team and how she has been strategic in making sure that her voice is heard, but then acknowledging at times that she is a hidden figure when gender and race are compounded in certain spaces:

So it's kind of two-fold. It's like for other Black women, for people of color, I want to demonstrate and show I am comfortable in my skin. I am comfortable with my identity I can talk about it. I can be who I am. And also be thoughtful and strategic enough to know how will my voice show up in this room and how do I need to show up in this room? So, if I have to tell Louis, my chief of staff, I need you to go have this conversation he knows the deal. He knows he's a White male who has a Master's degree from Harvard, who played football in high school, he gets that all of that demonstrates, sends a certain message, so he'll carry it when he needs to. If that's what we feel like we need to do, but there's certainly strategy behind when do I use my voice in certain rooms even if it's not coming from me because I know it'll hit a different way based on the audience.

This was a very interesting point and as I talked with the other superintendents they asserted the importance of having their voices heard. The districts they served had

very different political viewpoints and dependent upon the issues at hand there were times when it was necessary for the superintendent to carry the message, but as Dr. Adams described in her county and state the politics at play were heightened, so strategy was important for her when she needed to show up and when she could have someone from her team show up.

The discussion continued and she elaborated on her interview experience with the board for the superintendency. Her presentation gave the community insight into who she was as a Black woman and the importance of being her authentic self:

When I applied for the superintendency one of the very first slides I had in my interview with the board and this was a public interview, talked about race and racism, and how I was going to be absolutely focused on pursuing racial equity. I talked about my why, I talked about my grandfather, I talked about who I am as a Black woman, I talked about that I'm a mother of Black children. And if we looked at the data of my district I should be really anxious and nervous about if my children are going to thrive in our district, and the reality is our district and just about every district in America, Black parents have a reason to be very concerned about their children's livelihood. And that struck a chord with a lot of people. I think because I was sort of coming into this space and saying this is who I am. I'm not going to shy away from who I am. Who I am influences and impacts the decisions I make as a leader and how I show up in this world and we're going to talk about it. I'm going to talk about it as a superintendent we're going to talk about it as a school district. And I've had a number of people tell me particularly Black leaders you doing that, just sort of allowed, you gave me permission,

without giving me permission to show up as me, and as fully me. And that has been very powerful to hear from people.

Dr. Adams understood her intersections of race and gender and managed to challenge the status quo by being her true and authentic self. Her commitment to doing so has provided space for others who find it challenging to do the same in their environments.

Dr. Goodman described when she interviewed for the chief of schools role, how she encountered her first conversation where she realized that she was seen as a Black woman. Her past positions had afforded her opportunities to be in the Black communities of the district, so the experience and the lens from which she was portrayed was eye opening:

I remember three months into the job we were in the car together driving to visit a school and my mentor got a call from the chief education officer and her words to him were, hey, Dr. Goodman is not going to be with you long. So, when he got off the phone he was like they're looking at you to be my role. So, then I was feeling, oh my God, I thought the interview for the deputy chief officer was hard. The interview for the chief officer I thought I was going to need therapy after that. But I went through the process and there was a woman who is one of my mentors to this day. Her name is Tina and she was in the interview. Tina was tough as nails and everybody talked about, oh, you don't want to have to deal with Tina so we were in the interview and when the interview was over Tina called me because I didn't really know her but she knew people that knew me. She called me and she said, you know you're ready. She said I'm not the person that makes the final

decision. But, I sat in on your interview she was like you're ready but you're too hard. And I'm thinking to myself, what does that mean?

She continued to explain what she felt during this time. She realized that for the first time who she was as a Black woman was misconstrued. Not understanding in the moment that she would need to stand in the construction of her multiple identities:

She said, I'm just going to tell you this because I'm a Black woman and I've gotten the same advice. She said you were too rough. She was like your passion can be intimidating. It was her and two White men that interviewed me. She told me that she had to fight for me in the debrief. I was like fight for me, what do you mean? I know my content, I've been doing this work. You knocked it out of the park, but I had to still fight for you because they couldn't get past you. This was the first Black woman conversation I ever had, the first one, because remember I was in a Black community. Even when I was the deputy I was in a Black, impoverished community, so here now it's two White men and her and she also told me you know one of the reasons I pushed to be a part of this interview panel? I said, why? She said because of this.

She further explained that her being and knowing as a Black woman in this moment was almost debilitating especially when she had worked so hard at this level of the organization:

At first I felt like well I don't even want the job. If you had to argue with them about whether or not I should be selected then I don't even want the job. She's like, no you won't. You will not take that attitude that's what we do. She said know your worth. Because if you don't get this job and you don't do the work that

you need to do for the kids that need you. She said, everybody loses and they win. So, I ended up getting the job and I remember meeting with my supervisor, he was a White man. He had “the talk” with me when I got the job. You know, Dr. Goodman, you are going to have to tone it down a little bit, and I’m like okay. I’m just listening because you don’t even know me you had an interview with me. He said why did you feel like you needed to present all of the data from the portfolio of schools that you were interviewing to supervise? I said because the data was horrible. I said it’s the lowest performing network of schools in the city. Why wouldn’t I present that? And they’re all kids that are Black and brown kids living in poverty. Why wouldn’t that be important? He said well, I just don’t think that’s what’s going to work to get your principals on board and to lead them. I don’t think that you should start with the data, and it’s always one of those things where I’m like oh I get it. It’s okay for this data to be bad and look the way it looked because that’s the expectation for the population and that’s literally how I felt. So, of course, I didn’t listen to anything he said. I said okay I heard you. I ended up leaving that role after five years and my network of schools went from the bottom to the number one network for growth. We were number one year after year.

The intersections of race and gender that the participants experienced fully allowed them to embrace their positions as being both Black and woman. It is impossible to isolate and understand the experiences that Black women encounter in the multiplicity of their identities. While Dr. Sullivan explained that her experiences were such that gender was more salient than race, she simultaneously acknowledged her awareness as a Black woman. Conjunctively, Dr. Adams and Dr. Goodman both experienced the

oppressive effects of the duality of their race and gender while navigating their authenticity to lead as Black women. Hence, Black women's mentors and support networks were vital and provided the emotional and mental support needed for them to navigate those challenges. Collins (2000) suggests that Black women as a group share a distinct consciousness that fosters an intersectional understanding of oppression.

Unapologetically Me. The second theme unapologetically me developed as the dialogue with the superintendents deepened in understanding the meaning of the participants' lived experiences as Black women. While listening to their stories the analysis of this theme overlapped with the aforementioned theme and underscored the findings as the superintendents expressed their unapologetic ways of knowing as Black women as they navigated their leadership.

Black women have unique experiences that other groups of women cannot relate to regarding negative stereotypes (Brown, 2018; Chance, 2022; Kennedy, 2019). During the interviews it was evident that the superintendents had each experienced biases and stereotypes that people associated with Black women. Dr. Sullivan shared a time when she had to remind her staff about their roles as servant leaders. She explained at the beginning of the pandemic where she reminded employees who were home complaining because they were asked to go out and help deliver meals to families in need. She said to her staff, "You get a check every two weeks but we have people out there who don't know where their next meals are coming from. I'm going to need you to leave the comforts of that home and help me distribute meals." Her sentiments showed her dedication to the community while calling out her staff on their moral obligation to serve alongside her.

Dr. Adams expressed the need for others to see how she represented her true self in every way possible:

Last week, my chief schools officer who's a Black woman, and my executive assistant who's a Black woman, my CSO, just got her braids put in and she was trying to figure out how to do a bun. So they were just in my office doing that so I took a picture and I tweeted it. Again, that was me marrying authenticity and strategy because I want people to know and understand this is the kind of office I lead, this is the kind of team I lead. Where there are two Black women sitting in my office and here's a picture of one trying to help the other do a lesson on how to put her braids in a good bun. That was me showing up as me but also being strategic about this is what I want people to understand about what we are creating in [Deweyville Public Schools], and that's the permission giving right that I didn't say. I think that's where as a Black woman in leadership there's always that sort of marrying a strategy and authenticity that I'm thinking about all the time and using my tools to try to communicate as much as I can.

Her authenticity showed the compassion she has for her community and that their representation mattered. The power of that picture in that moment lets people know that she makes no apologies for who she is and grants permission for other Black women to lead unapologetically as well.

Dr. Goodman spent time describing the stereotypes and biases that exists due to societal norms for Black women. She explained how she has had to navigate the terrain to combat the misconceptions:

Coming into this and then navigating the terrain of being a Black woman who's perceived a lot of times people don't expect us to be articulate. They don't expect us to be polished. They don't expect us to have emotional intelligence and they take every characteristic of a boss negatively when its portrayed by a Black woman. So, as a Black woman I'm going to be seen as aggressive rather than assertive. If I were a White man it would be he's assertive, he's a boss. But as a Black woman in the boss role I'm not assertive, I'm aggressive. We're doing the same job, right?

She further explained how these biases generalize Black women, yet how she has learned to harness her passion but maintain her straightforwardness:

If I'm passionate, it's not passion, I'm emotional. If it's a White man, he's so passionate about...its passion for him, but it's emotion for me. So, these are things that I know to be true in terms of the societal perceptions of African American women that I have had to live my life combating. All women are going to deal with you're a mom, how are you going to do this job? So all women, Black, White, Hispanic, doesn't matter. We're all going to share that but the things I just described, are you bitter or bold? That happens when you're a Black woman. The good thing is that I've had mentors who are also Black women who have navigated it before me and they know the traps. So, they were able to coach me and nurture me to be able to deal with it. So coming into this I've learned how to be balanced in my approach. I'm really direct and straightforward but I've learned how to package that.

The level of vulnerability that Black women are required to have in such hostile spaces is hard to fathom. As Black women you have to learn the dance per se and move accordingly. Many leaders have to learn the political and social prowess to successfully combat the microaggressions that come with the job, yet be unapologetic in knowing who they are. Black women in turn can retreat to their “sistah” circles to celebrate their Black womanhood unapologetically, behave in culturally specific ways, nurture relationships with other women who share similar experiences, receive validation of their gender and race related experiences, and fortify the metaphorical boundaries protecting their safe space from external dangers (Davis 2015, 2018a; Niles Goins, 2011). Negative stereotypes and biases can further present dissonance between the perceptions of women and their supposed ways of being because they feel it’s how they have to be as leaders opposed to who they truly are and want to be as leaders (Beckwith et al., 2016; Brown, 2016).

Know Your Net Worth. The third theme know your net worth derived as the discussions deepened with the superintendents while understanding meaning of their intersections of race, gender, and class. In the same vein, Black women must know their worth. Since, the superintendency is a White male dominated field it is important for Black women to understand their access to the rules that accompany the position, and have the prowess to negotiate their social, political, and economic capital. Missed opportunities were delineating factors that caused them to assess their value and worth as they worked alongside their White male counterparts.

Dr. Sullivan expressed how Black women tended to count themselves out before taking a chance on themselves:

It is so unfortunate and I say this all the time when I have an opportunity to say it. The reason I never thought I could be a superintendent was because I never saw anyone that looked like me. So you can't be what you don't see. You would think five years ago I would have known that I have the ability to be a superintendent, but I was like why would they pick me? The last female superintendent here was 20 years ago. They're not going to think about me. So, we already take ourselves out of it because we don't want to be disappointed again. But once people, once that board takes a chance on you, and realizes that yeah this is probably what we needed.

Dr. Adams echoed the same belief in knowing your worth:

Especially when it's a person of color, or a woman, because as women we so often just talk ourselves out of the opportunity before we even get there. I did that myself, and it's like okay how do we rework our own self-talk? Because guess what? These men not out here telling themselves they not good enough, they might have 50% of the credentials it doesn't matter they're going for it. Meanwhile, we're like I didn't check that one out of fifteen things, so I must not be good enough. Like girl, get out of here.

Dr. Goodman shared her thoughts on knowing your worth. She explained how her mentor helped her to realize her worth in everything she did:

I was in the chief officer of teaching and learning position for two years and my chief education officer, Doris Randle got promoted to CEO of [Freedom Public Schools]. She came to me and she said, just so you know I'm not interviewing you I'm not asking you, you're going to be my chief education officer. Period. So

she got promoted to CEO, and then I got promoted to be the second in command as the chief education officer and I said to her what made you pick me? She said it was a foregone conclusion everyone in the organization expected me to pick you. That's the other thing she really was the one that drilled that into me about knowing your worth. Because I think often times as women we are just happy to be here in these roles, Black women I should say, because we don't always expect that people are going to see us and promote us, so when we get in these roles we're just happy to be here. I think about me and Doris when she became CEO and I became chief education officer, we grew professionally, mentally, and emotionally. We matured after going through some tumultuous experiences that I would say it wasn't until I was leaving [Freedom Public Schools] that I really knew what it meant to know my worth.

She discussed the disparities in equal pay for men versus women in the superintendency. So often, as Black women we accept less than rather than challenging the status quo to get what we deserve. She shared an experience where her former CEO did not negotiate her contract to fully maximize her worth. She explained the impression and the first-hand impact it had on her prior to becoming a superintendent:

She was one of the top CEO's I knew how hard she was working how hard we were working in one of the largest districts in the country. And when you look at the top five school districts in the country at the time when she became the CEO, it was only I think her and one other woman that was leading a large school division and all of the men were making more than them. If you just look at the top four, [Springtown] was run by a man, the [Chancellor of Sunville] was a man,

[Allentown] was a man. She was the only woman in that top four and all of them were making anywhere from \$60,000 to \$100,000 more than her because she didn't negotiate her contract right. We talk about that to this day and it really is just as a Black woman it's like I get to be the CEO of [Freedom Public Schools] we are so quick to just be happy that somebody sees us that we don't even fight or advocate for ourselves. So, before she left she actually fought for it. And even then the raise she got still didn't put her at parity with other superintendents in the largest school divisions.

Despite the self-doubt they each experienced at some point in their careers they persisted and acknowledged they learned to recognize their net worth in their roles as superintendents. Collins (2000) posits that Black women who remain rooted in their own experiences as Black women who maintain a strong foundation in Black women's culture in their self-valuation may be more apt to take a critical posture towards the sociological paradigms that exist. Importantly, the influence of mentorship helped them to recognize those self-affirming areas towards their own advocacy.

Aspiring Superintendents

There were two themes that emerged in the data among the aspiring superintendents that addressed the second research question they were, (1) Black excellence, and (2) the fear factor. These themes aligned with the conceptual framework in which the knowledge claims produced were validated by the meaning produced in their lived experiences as Black women leaders.

Black Excellence. The first theme Black excellence, emerged as the aspiring superintendents shared stories about the influences of their race and gender intersections

as Black women in their roles. Many of the aspiring superintendents provided narrative accounts of Black women who exuded excellence in their leadership. As we discussed influences that played a role in their journeys as Black women, Ms. Myers and Dr. Thompson shared that their earliest memories taught them as Black people that their footprints must exhibit excellence. Ms. Myers discussed her principal during her early teaching years as being one of her first role models:

I'd say my first year teaching I had an amazing principal, Penny Wise, she dressed like the principal. Every day she had on a buttoned-up shirt, a beautiful skirt, and pearls. And every single day I was a teacher on that campus she would walk through everyone's classroom. She was only in there for like two minutes, but she would walk over looked next to what a student was doing, say hello, walk over to a station she would come in and just walk through your room stop here and there, and then smile and walk out. She was such a role model because as a brand new teacher every day she saw all of her teachers, all of her students, and on pay days she would walk and hand you your pay stub. So, that was just her routine. It probably took her at the most an hour out of her day. But she just walked through everywhere so she inspired me. After that year I thought I'm going to get my Masters, I want to be like her.

Another example was when she moved into her first leadership role in central administration she described what she considered examples of Black excellence:

My first day in central office in [Jennings ISD] my boss took me on a tour to say hello to everyone and we met Dr. Janice Smith who was the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. I said, oh my gosh I want to be you

when I grow up because that was my ultimate goal. I could be an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, and during those years that was the thing that I really wanted to do because I had fallen in love with curriculum. She said, no don't be just like me be better than me. So, I would say those are two ladies that were just total class acts that really led from inspirational leadership and really didn't have to say much. It was their actions every day in the work that really inspired me. It was almost like Michelle Obama who's just this figure of you can do anything. For whatever reason, my mom made me believe that you could do anything. So, I just grew up thinking you can be president if you want to be, you can be an engineer, you can be an astronaut, you can be an oceanographer, the sky's the limit, and so that just kind of became part of the fabric of who I am.

Similarly, Dr. Thompson shared experiences where she was taught very early as a child that Black excellence was what they were going to be. She shared that by her parents growing up in the 50's and 60's all she knew was Black excellence. She affirmed that her upbringing was what developed her into the leader she is today as a Black woman:

I will readily say I am definitely a child of privilege, I very much am, so my parents, my grandparents owned their own home. And my father went to college and got an architectural degree but ended up working for one of the chemical companies and ended up being pretty high up in the chemical company. He grew up from his parents of this Black excellence, they were in the 50s, 60s, and it's going to be Black excellence that is what we are. So I grew up and we were the

only Black family in our neighborhood. We had the biggest house in the neighborhood because my father said look I know that we are going to be the only Black family, but if we're going to be the only Black family we are going to show everybody that not only are we as good as, but we are going to be better than. So, we always had the biggest house. We always had the nicest car. We had the first, I laugh every time, we had a big old Cadillac and we had the first car phone on the block, and my father would be showing the neighbors. Come see I got the car. So, we had the first microwave that's just how it was.

When asked how do you preserve yourself as a Black woman leading the charge, she further elaborated about her experience leading as a principal in her district:

I constantly think about this idea of it's a constant kind of code switching, right? I mean I have predominantly the west side of our district very white, very affluent, and I was the principal of the gem of [Falls], 3500 kids super affluent and my superintendent said I need you in that seat so that you can help us lead the way. Part of me wanted to be offended I'm like why me as the Black woman? Then the other part of me said, I get it. My father has always preached Black excellence. And that's kind of how I have always been and I have had these moments in my leadership where I'm like okay what am I going to do?

Black women are often taught they could do anything, and it spurs a different level of confidence. Culturally, this is what most Black girls experience growing up. Excellence then becomes the expectation, and as Black women in leadership roles they rely on this level of excellence to surface in their work. In the same vein, there was a consensus among Dr. Rhodes, Dr. Brown, and Dr. Drake who shared similar experiences

as Black women to lead in Black excellence. They understood that as Black women that aspire to the superintendency there is a heightened level of awareness and excellence they must have while ascending towards the position.

Dr. Rhodes discussed her work ethic and her desire to be coached she said, “I’m going to do a good job, but I want to do a great job and I want to do a great job all day, every day. I’ve been in positions where I haven’t been coached and so I fall back on the coaches who have really impacted my life, my career. But I also think I can’t follow someone who doesn’t know how to lead me.” Dr. Brown echoed those same sentiments. She discussed the importance of knowing who you are grounded in Black excellence. Lastly, Dr. Drake shared that her influences cultivated Black excellence in the sense that she has had to work harder to show and prove her worth.

The Fear Factor. The second theme fear factor, emerged among the aspiring superintendents as a result of hearing stories about the fear of failure that Black women experienced when they faced challenges. They expressed that Black women will oftentimes not apply for positions because they can’t check all of the boxes on the application, yet somehow men will apply without the necessary credentials. Dr. Thompson contended that she felt more prepared for the superintendency than her previous assistant superintendent role. “I have no fear of that. The superintendency does not intimidate me. Being an assistant superintendent or these technical things that I had to do was more intimidating for me because I’m like oh my God I have to write a grant. I don’t know if I could do that.” The fear she experienced was the inadequacy of not performing well in the assistant superintendent role because she did not feel prepared.

Dr. Drake discussed her feelings towards the fear of taking risks. “I know for myself that I'm not going to put myself in a situation where I'm not going to be successful. And that probably holds me back more than anything because I never think I'm ready. I've read that it's something that women do, we never think we're ready, but a man will apply and as women we think we have to have all the boxes checked off and we don't take that risk, and so I think I'm an example of that, that's just transparency.”

Dr. Brown discussed the mentoring relationship she had with one of her employees who had been promoted to another position within the department. She explained how excited she was for her. In her excitement she shared feelings that she would miss the employee and the employee expressed that she did not realize the feelings that Dr. Brown had for her. She explained, “Well I couldn't because that would have hindered you, you would have had too much self-doubt. Like, she really needs me I don't want her to go. I was like I would never do that. So I think my successes and the feedback that I've gotten is that people watch me and they get motivated by my walk.” This is powerful thinking and shows the transference of fear and doubt to feelings of empowerment.

Ms. Myers talked about believing in yourself and how she worked to remove the fear that so many women experience in leadership roles:

It's just really believe in yourself. Put yourself out there, be very collaborative, sign up for every committee, and do things that you are interested in that you can do, find your niche, find the thing that drives you. Then, apply for the job, you will never get the job if you don't apply for it. So, apply for the job even if it's like fifteen of them and go on the interview, and don't after the interview say I don't

know if I want it let me call and take my name out of it. No, just go and see you won't get 100% of the jobs that you don't apply for, so I would say that. Then, I would search and look at job titles and see what sounds the most interesting to me. Is this a good fit? Is this a good role? There's not one path to anything. I think just go for it believe in yourself and hone your interview skills. We tend to just put our heads down and do the work. And, you have to stop and look up and look around and reach out. That's my only advice to myself because I'm in my office right now plugging away because there's never enough time.

Lastly, Dr. Rhodes expressed that her experiences empowered her to push past fear because she always prepared for the unknown. Her strong desire towards learning allowed her take on new challenges. The findings were suggestive that as Black women they each dealt with some form of feeling “not good enough” and at some point in their careers allowed fear to grapple them. However, they all expressed a desire to make sure that children had the best possible opportunity for a quality education. Their leadership pursuits and ascension towards the superintendency combated that fear and allowed them to continue forward.

Summary

The analysis of the stories collected allowed three superintendents and five aspiring superintendents to tell their stories of mentoring and the impact it had on their career trajectories as Black women. The data suggests that mentoring for Black women in the role of superintendent as well as an aspiring superintendent is essential to moving up the career ladder. While mentoring had a significant influence on each participants' career trajectory, they indicated at some point in their careers that sponsorship became

the pivotal point where their career truly ascended. Those sponsors in some cases were African American women and men, but in other cases were White men or Hispanic women who paved the way for these women.

In such, mentoring provided a safe space for them to exist as Black women leaders. The superintendents, especially, discussed the importance of a strong network that surrounded them. Specifically, the power of the Black network emerged for these women since they operate in a role dominated by White men. The intersections of race and gender in this case helped them to authentically represent their beliefs, and kept them grounded in their leadership as a Black woman. Therefore, the support systems of other Black women who have chartered the course and who share similar experiences was paramount to their success in the role.

While each participant discussed barriers and challenges they encountered, they each maintained a tenacity and commitment to improving our education system for all children. As Black women, they each understood their challenges, but they learned to navigate those challenges. Their desire to pay it forward to other Black women who aspire to the role was important. Two of the superintendents were the first African American women to serve in the role in their districts, while it was twenty years ago that a woman superintendent was named in the district for the other superintendent participant. They each indicated their insurmountable duty to make sure that they are not the last. They described their duty to identify and cultivate the pathway for the next aspiring person to lead the charge.

In conclusion, mentoring played a significant role in their career trajectories. Informal networks and formal networks of mentoring were necessary components for

Black women to reach this executive level of leadership. The work is hard and without the proper support and guidance, many of the women expressed they could not thrive in their roles. Their resounding faith in God has kept them thus far, and they each understood there is much work ahead to bring parity for Black women as superintendents.

Chapter V

Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a discussion of findings and their connection to the conceptual framework. Additionally, I provide implications for practice, policy, and future research. Through the interpretation of the individual and collective stories of both the superintendents and aspiring superintendents, mentoring for these Black women leaders was a necessary component to their career trajectories. Their lived experiences provide compelling notions to understand each unique journey. While some of the participants shared commonalities in their experiences, they each navigated through personal triumphs and challenges in their trajectory towards the superintendency.

As I sought to understand the impacts and influence of mentoring for Black women superintendents and those who aspire to the superintendency in their career trajectories, I utilize Patricia Hill Collins' (1986) conceptual framework, Black Feminist Thought, as a conceptual lens to make meaning of the lived experiences of these Black women. As a result, the Black feminist epistemological framework aligned and undergirded the findings of the study. In this chapter, I provide a conceptual analysis of the connections that developed from thematic analysis to Collins' Black feminist epistemological tenets. Collins theorized four dimensions of a Black feminist epistemological framework, as noted: (1) criterion of meaning, (2) the use of dialogue, (3) ethic of caring, and (4) ethic of personal accountability. The themes that developed from both participant groups and their connections to Collins' Black feminist epistemological framework are further discussed in this chapter.

Discussion

When Black women speak of their experiences, they not only tell the fundamental truths about themselves, but also about the systems and structures of their life in which they exist (Williams, 2020). The study explored the lived experiences of African American women superintendents and those who aspire to the role and their impacts of mentorship on their career trajectories while examining the confluence of race, gender, and class oppressions. The analysis of the narratives of the participants assert that mentoring was beneficial and a necessity to their ascension towards the superintendency. While mentoring proved to be beneficial, sponsorship deemed to move them through the pipeline to the superintendency. The participants provided several examples of how they dealt with challenges they faced as African American women superintendents and as aspiring superintendents. Their reliance on supportive networks were essential in them thriving in the role.

Similarly, to African American women in corporate leadership African American women leaders in education develop and engage in formal and informal networks to provide them the necessary validation and support (Holder et al., 2015). Albeit, there is a sparse number of African American women superintendents represented in K-12 schools, the participants managed to engage in those networks that nurtured them with the professional and social counterspace to share their experiences. For those participants that experienced successful mentoring relationships they congruently experienced a swifter career trajectory. The support networks were necessary for women to lean on those who walk in their shoes and can provide advice, affirm them, and forge connections, but equally important to connect with others who aspire to the role. Paying it forward was a

way for these networks to organically build a coalition of powerful Black women who continue to lift as they rise. Leaders saw this as their servant duty and promoted the building of strong networks to help lessen the burdens they carry in their leadership roles.

As Black women climbing the career ladder in a White male dominated field they individually expressed that it was important for them to know who they are. The findings indicate that Black women are undeterred by the negative stereotypes and biases that are historically rooted in the intersections of race and gender as they navigate their roles as superintendents and while they aspire to the role. The conceptual framework undergirded the study to understand how Black women made meaning through their lived experiences as superintendents and for those who aspire to the role. The study provides insight into the trajectories and perceived influences of mentoring while understanding how as Black women they navigated their career pathways at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

The implications of the findings arguably found that for Black women navigating their pathway, it was a unique journey. The pathway to the seat for some was traditional and for others nontraditional. Amidst the challenges, setbacks, and barriers there were many successes that these women experienced as a result of them serving in their authenticity as Black women. Black women's experiences are not and cannot be compared to those of White women or other minorities in this country (Tyree & Jones, 2018). Notably, two of the study participants were the first African American women to attain the role of superintendents in their districts.

The findings indicate that each of the participants led with an undeniable assurance of knowing who they are as Black women. So much that they described how it

was sort of their permission giving for other Black women to embrace their cultural standpoints as Black women. As a Black woman knowing your net worth was a perceived challenge for some of the participants as they entered the role as superintendent. Negating the ideology that “we’re just happy to be here” was something they had to overcome. Their experiences taught them to know their worth when challenging the dominant viewpoint of their White counterparts, yet empowered and validated their knowledge claims as Black women that further silenced those criticisms. In conclusion, the findings were in line with the conceptual framework as Black women existed within a paradoxical space of being both a woman and a Black woman sharing their experiences while uplifting those with their stories who share the same oppressions due to their intersections of race, gender, and class.

Thematic Connections to Black Feminist Thought

Collins (1990) theorizes Black feminist epistemology, as a unique standpoint that reflects how Black women experience the world as a result of their gendered, racial experiences. Black women’s experiences must be captured using culturally appropriate mechanisms that center and privilege Black women’s ways and knowing in the center of their own analysis (Collins, 1990; Dillard, 2000). Collins (1990) utilizes four dimensions of a Black feminist epistemological framework comprised of the following considerations: (1) lived experiences as a criterion of meaning, (2) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (3) ethic of caring, and (4) ethic of personal accountability. Black feminists rely on lived experiences as a means to construct and validate knowledge regarding their status in society, the world around them, and how to traverse their

marginalized social location (West et al., 2021). The following promulgates the themes encountered and their associations to the epistemological framework.

Criterion of Meaning

Black feminist theory posits that freedoms from the oppressive intellectual, cultural, and racial stereotypes occurred through the documenting of the lived experiences of Black women. These noted experiences explain how Black women know what they know through episodes they have encountered within their lives (Collins, 2000; 2016). Knowledge claims invoked by Black women rely on concrete experience as criterion for credibility (Collins, 1989). The themes that developed described the lived experiences of Black women and their connected knowing to the actualization of their own stories.

Career Pathway. The role of high school principal is often the stepping stone on the pathway to the superintendency (Robinson et al., 2017). Only two of the eight participants served as high school principals, suggesting that alternative pathways were taken as they navigated to the superintendency. Dr. Sullivan and Dr. Adams shared they never aspired to be superintendents. However, they had mentors and sponsors who pushed them to consider the superintendency. Women rising through the ranks typically had a sponsor especially when their path was an unconventional one to help position them for the superintendency. With that they were advanced through the career pipeline gaining valuable experience along their trajectories. Dr Thompson, an aspiring superintendent shared:

I've never had an inclination that I would go to the district office and when he appointed me to become principal of the middle school he said, you aren't going

to be long at the site. I'm just going to tell you, you are going to be at the district office and you're going to be a superintendent, just so you know...and I have not and I still for a long time I did not have aspirations to be a superintendent, but he pushed me. He said, no we need you we need you in the seat they're not enough. We need you in the seat.

Several studies indicate that women do not follow the typical career progression used by men and find alternative career paths to access the superintendency (Glass, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2017). Polinchock (2013) and Sperandio and Devdas (2015) describe a number of career paths taken by women superintendents with no dominant pattern, but many navigating to central office positions and cabinet positions. As for Black women, because they are so few and far between many believed that they must pave the way for others.

Am I One and Not the Other? Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) laid the groundwork for the theory of intersectionality that reshaped feminist and anti-racist scholarship and practice. Kolenz et al. (2017) posits the insight that multiple systems of oppression--race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, structure women's experiences and shape their social locations, thereby differentiated women of color feminism. Further, it decentered whiteness as the social norm and inevitable point of comparison.

Whereas, the Combahee River Collective offers a nuanced approach to understanding a robust version of feminism that links consciousness raising with the possibilities of effecting individual, collective, and social transformation in ways that do not become suppressed by personal agendas or single-issue politics (Combahee River Collective, 1981). According to Kolenz et al. (2017), while the work of the collective

asserts its contribution to the development of the feminist principle, “that the personal is political”...it refers to the “psychological toll” of such work, especially as a Black woman and speaks of experiences of “success and defeat, joy and pain, victory and failure.” Therefore, women of color affirm two things, (1) yes, we are here, and (2) one’s viewpoint comes from race and gender, not in spite of them. Validating the multiplicity of locations from which to make knowledge claims represents an alternative to silence, invisibility, and being represented by western scholarship (Kolenz et al., 2017).

Dr. Goodman described navigating in her role as a Black woman while enduring the political climate:

One good thing I think in terms of the experiences that I've encountered that helped me to navigate this role as a Black woman, I think being a Black woman and always having to be mindful that I'm going to be perceived a certain way no matter what. No matter what I do right there was a perception of me before I even signed the contract. So I think being in a big city like [Freedom] and the politics and working under, Harold Thomas, he was a machine and I learned a lot of my political prowess from working under him, so I'm really grateful for that. That experience helped me to navigate the political landscape where I am now, the superintendency, as much as I'm an educator and I want to stay laser focused on that. I'm a business, I'm a CEO. It just happens to be that I'm running a business and my business is education.

Many of the participants discussed honing their political skills and strategies to combat negative stereotypes they encountered as Black women in the role, and as they aspire towards the role. They also shared experiences where they recognized as Black women

they could not behave as others do, such as White men, women, or even Black men in the role because the playing field is different. For example, Dr. Rhodes discussed an experience she had at an aspiring superintendent's meeting:

I've been in aspiring superintendent academies and I've listened to panels where people don't even remember some things about their interview. Well, I don't know, I don't even remember how I answered that. I'm like, you're a superintendent and you're talking to aspiring superintendents, yet that's how you're responding on a panel?... Just listening, just watching their social media the things that they post on Twitter, we would never post that on Twitter. We just know the playing field is not leveled and that's fine. We're good with that we know it's unfortunate, but again we stay in our lane and we believe that what's for us is going to come to us. We know that we can't hang out and do certain things and it's unfortunate, but there is a difference.

Participants found it supremely important to stay true to the constructions of their identity. From a Black Feminist perspective their expressions of their inward beliefs and outward actions were congruent with their cultural ways of knowing. The findings align with Cox (2017) and Brookins (2018) whereby the participants communicated a specific consciousness of how their identities of being both Black and woman exposed them to oppressive stereotypes connected to the intersections of race and gender. Collins (1986) argues that Black women's narratives must acknowledge the intersections of those lived experiences producing facts and theories about the Black woman's experience that clarifies a Black woman's standpoint for Black women.

Black Excellence. The participants each detailed their experiences growing up as a child. Their identities centered on being told that they could grow up to be whatever they desired, and to operate in Black excellence. Their familial upbringing provided a sense of empowerment and confidence to the participants. They expressed attending historically Black colleges and universities where they were affirmed in their studies. This resounding pride promoted Black excellence to pervade the spaces that they moved into throughout their careers.

A conversation during the focus group occurred that centered around the idea of operating in Black excellence, yet finding a healthy balance to understand that you remain human in your pursuits:

Dr. Thompson: Speaking with excellence has helped and has also been a weight because when I leave the house, I'm like, okay, is everything just right. When I answer the phone, when I talk to people, when I answer an email, is it just right? I reread it, could this be interpreted one way? I've had to get over being offended...but it's been a weight it's a huge weight every time leaving the house.

Dr. Adams: Yeah, I feel that from you. I've tried to release myself from some of that. Some of it is positional too, right? It's identity and position. It's both of those things, but I have tried to release myself. I call it my “good enough bar” both personally and professionally. It's like okay, where is my good enough bar and let me adjust it because I cannot do it all. I cannot. I am a human being, I only have but so much capacity, and I do want to be excellent in everything. I believe that I aspire to that in everything, but there is a balance...but sort of that self-talk is it good enough? I am good enough, I am communicating with authenticity and with

excellence because that is what is within me. I feel your energy even in carrying that weight. I feel like I feel it a little bit even through the call and just want to encourage you to let some of that go because it's good enough and you are enough.

Dr. Goodman: You know what, Dr. Thompson? There's going to be times where no matter how well you speak, no matter how well you write, no matter how good you look, someone is still going to have something to say, multiple people...It doesn't matter. You have to just know it for yourself and let those things be like a duck, let it roll off your back... It is okay if they don't like your language or the clothes you wear because ultimately you're there to do a job that's so much bigger than anyone's personal opinion, and the sooner that you get comfortable with knowing that you're not just good enough you represent excellence that your father talks about every single day. As long as you know that then that is enough, and that's the way we have to live our lives.

Their discussion was powerful in that they validated their own knowledge claims as Black women and recognized within the discourse of their experiences that they were enough. Despite, the ways in which their dispositions are situated in the oppressive nature of the knowledge claims produced by White men assumptions. It is necessary for Black women to rise in their authority as Black women, and no longer be subjected to the inferior mentality that White men perpetuate. Collins (2000) asserts that new knowledge claims develop when Black women engage in collective dialogue with one another, rather than in isolation and based upon pre-existing, hegemonic “taken-for-granted” ideas.

The Use of Dialogue

The use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims by way of connectedness validates common and unique experiences for Black women and provides them a space to think through their experiences (West et al., 2021). The narratives constructed were based on the participants' unique stories through their professional trajectories. The counterspace they were provided to share their stories provided meaning to their lived experiences as Black women. At times during the interviews, the participants found themselves saying that they were preaching to themselves when sharing advice with me. Their vulnerabilities allowed them to be honest about what they experienced as Black women in the role of superintendent and while they aspired to the role. The theme fear factor, emerged amongst the aspiring superintendents as they highlighted experiences when they did not pursue opportunities out of fear of rejection or other isolated feelings.

The Fear Factor. Ms. Myers described her feelings toward applying for the superintendency as something she would eventually do, but knew that the timing now is not right for her. She described the backlash she received while she was a deputy superintendent and talked about her reconsideration of the superintendency. She explained many of the hardships that she would encounter before even applying to the superintendency:

I think going into these roles just knowing that leadership is seen by and large as a male role it's men's work and hoping to change that stereotype as much as possible. As a Black woman, I on paper have all the credentials, but it's going to be very hard. My name is Felicia, I'm a woman and I'm a Black woman. I just

think it's going to be a lot more political and not necessarily based on my skill or background or path.

Contrarily, Dr. Drake provided advice about pursuing professional goals and shared, “My advice is simply to just keep pushing and don't let anyone stop you. Don't let anyone stop you from doing what you want to do, and I'm talking to myself right now because sometimes you might have to look beyond what you're accustomed to, to get where you want to be, but don't be afraid to step out.” Her advice was also to herself affirming her own fears about moving and looking past where she is for the next opportunity.

Dr Goodman shared her sentiments as a superintendent on self-doubt and fear that women naturally experience, “It also is helpful in times where you don't feel that sense of can I do this? As women it's natural for us to second guess ourselves. We cannot be paralyzed by it, which is why so many women don't even go out for these kinds of jobs.”

She then elaborated on her experience when she felt self-doubt and fear before applying for her current job. She submitted her application package within the last hour of the application window closing:

It was all because I was talking myself out of it because of fear, fear of the unknown, fear of rejection, fear of would they even pick a woman it's been nothing but White men leading that school division for the last how many years? All of it fear, fear, fear, but fear is not of God, and that's what I learned from that moment. So sometimes we just have to feel the fear, but still do what we need to do anyway to be able to walk through the doors that God has opened for us.

The fear that women experienced surrounding their aspirations to the superintendency can grapple and hinder their progress causing them to lose sight of their professional goals. They each discussed their significance to providing an optimal education for children. With that they understand the responsibilities that come with being a superintendent, however, as emerging leaders they must push past the fears that keep them from applying for the position.

Nonetheless, Dr. Rhodes was the only aspiring superintendent who was a finalist for the superintendency, while Dr. Thompson served as an interim superintendent. They each described their experiences in these roles as moments of growth, and did not feel a sense of fear towards pursuing the actual position. In fact, they described them as learning opportunities to cultivate their skills, assess what they want, and to ascertain match and fit for districts where they could lead unapologetically.

As evidenced in research, women of color experience barriers in educational leadership that invokes a sense of fear and rejection (Chance, 2022; White et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the participants in this study provide narrative accounts that circumvented those negative feelings. For most, those barriers were turned into opportunities.

Ethic of Caring

An ethic of caring is a key epistemological tenet in Black feminist thinking that includes recognizing Black women's uniqueness, emotional nuances in conversation, and capacity for empathy (Collins, 2000). It demonstrates an ability for Black women to seek connection and relationship when making decisions. It is this care work that Collins describes as influential to one's ability to fully understand another's experiences. While Black women's stories are uniquely positioned in the discourse of education leadership

literature, their personal expressiveness is not fully captured and accounted for in most literature on their mentoring experiences, specifically in the superintendency. The themes that developed persisted towards an epistemological dimension, ethic of caring for the participants.

Mentoring as a Necessity. Mentoring was the central theme by which all participants deemed necessary towards their ascension to the superintendency. The lack of mentoring has been described as a reason that women do not ascend through the career pipeline to the superintendency. While, the sample size of this study is not representative of the broader pool of African American women aspiring superintendents and superintendents, the findings of this study proved for African American women who were in senior level leadership positions within the organization, mentorship did not serve the same purpose as sponsorship when climbing the career ladder. Many of the participants described experiences where they were tapped to move into positions. As a result of mentoring and sponsorship their career paths widened, and in some instances their trajectories occurred rapidly.

The participants described their mentoring experiences, the impact, and influence it had on their career trajectories. The relational component that mentoring provided supported Collins dimension, ethic of caring, whereby each unique experience draws on a capacity of empathy for others. They explained the need to have an outsider to give them advice, to be a sounding board for decision making, and to affirm them in their day-to-day experiences. The superintendents explained that the work was hard and that there are times when they have to step away from the work and rely on their mentors and support

networks to sustain them. Equally, the aspiring superintendents discussed their experiences with mentors and sponsors and found extreme value in those relationships.

The findings were evidenced in the literature, for example, Jenkins (2019) posits that Black women must be proactive in finding mentors in order to gain perspective and receive guidance towards the superintendency. Brookins (2018) indicates that not only should aspiring superintendents and superintendents seek professional mentors, but also informal mentors who mentor you as a woman, trying to manage it all, work-life balance and self-care.

Comparatively, Dr. Goodman's approach was echoed where she described having three mentors who each mentor her for very different purposes, (1) one who mentors her in the superintendent role, (2) one who mentors her on just being a woman, who helps to manage her feelings, and (3) one who had the lived experiences both professionally and personally, and helps her with how to approach the work as a Black woman professional. She described knowing who to go to when there's a fire to be put out. Educational leaders, such as superintendents have to make sure they have the right people around them, those who have a genuine care for their well-being both personally and professionally.

While mentoring proved to be a necessity, so did sponsorship for these women. Interestingly, five of the eight participants shared experiences that they had White men sponsors who pushed them towards the superintendency or cabinet level positions. Dr. Adams described the support she received before being in the role and while in the role from her White male sponsor, who was her former superintendent. The relationship she

described had been one that was extremely important to her as she navigated as an African American woman superintendent.

Dr. Thompson explained that her career path was essentially laid out for her by her White male sponsor, who was her former superintendent. He acknowledged the need for more African American women in the superintendent seat and implored her to move towards the seat, by making sure she received the exposure, networking, and guidance along her journey. Similarly, Dr. Brown's former superintendent, a White man tapped her for a position that allowed her to move from the instructional side of the organization to the operational side, providing an alternative pathway. The sponsors did not take the place of mentoring, however, they did promote them along their career trajectories to the superintendency.

Aligned with current literature, mentoring is advantageous and matters for Black women who aspire towards the superintendency (Fields et al., 2019; Hansen, 2019), albeit White male allies in senior level leadership positions are the most influential sponsors (Chance, 2022). Conjunctively, formal and informal mentoring should be sought early in women's careers. Having mentors allowed these women to see their failures and setbacks, as well as their successes.

The Power of the Network. The stories of Black women are unique and there is not another person who experiences what a Black woman experiences other than another Black woman. While, same race mentoring was not underscored in the findings many of the women sought networks inclusive of Black women. They found that these networks provided safe spaces for them to "just be." These informal networks were groups of Black women who established connection and relationship because they chartered the

same paths. Further, West et al. (2021) posits the impact of engaging in mentoring relationships as (mentors and mentees) with other Black women, in which they used a specific strategy to gain and provide access to the written and unwritten rules in successfully navigating as professionals.

Dr. Sullivan described it as a sisterhood, where you look out for one another because they're so few and far between. She described the synergy as being uplifting towards one another because they share the same mission. Dr. Thompson described there was a notable difference between a network of White women and a network of Black women. One where they understood what it means to be a woman, but to be a Black woman is a whole different story. One component of Collins' (2000) ethic of caring provides insight into how Black women created support systems situated in leadership who are culturally similar.

Formal networks were also important for the participants and strongly encouraged for women of color to be a part of professional associations that center around relevant issues in the educational leadership landscape. Dr. Goodman shared that she met Dr. Adams through the organization, Chiefs for Change, where they forged a friendship and bond. Several of the participants were a part of The School Superintendent Association (AASA) Aspiring Superintendent Academy as well as the National Association of Black School Educators. These more formal networks provided spaces for them to connect with all kinds of thought partners in advancing the work in education leadership.

Ethic of Personal Accountability

Black women experience a moral responsibility in their relationships and social ties (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) notes that the historical tradition of *othermothering*

and *fictive kinship* in the Black community, had stimulated a sense of personal accountability amongst Black women who engage in various forms of race uplift as an overtly activist action. The participants each described their success not only in terms of their accomplishments, but also in how their success directly or indirectly provided greater access for other Black women following in their footsteps. The themes developed from the experiences of the participants.

Paying it Forward. Dr. Goodman shared the need to pour into those women around her. She stated, “I’m in debt and I’m intending to pay back that debt for those who have to walk this journey.” She shared that in her role she noticed a few women who lacked the necessary confidence to be affirmed in the work they do:

I've spent a lot of my time since I've been in this school division just affirming other women in leadership. Both Black and White but I see it more devastating for the Black women that are principals. Whether it's principals, whether they're in my cabinet, they just lack self-confidence and these are brilliantly talented people who have just been beat down, ignored, who've not been elevated. So I spend time doing that, just speaking life into them and making sure that I am representing myself in a way that commands respect, so that they can see that as a woman of color in leadership that you don't have to take a back seat, and you can demand respect and have a commanding presence.

Her desire to uplift the next woman resonates from the belief that she must be a model because other people get their inspiration and strength from seeing someone living, walking, breathing, and speaking the way that they are sometimes afraid to do. She also

realizes that from whence she came, and the many people who helped her to get to where she is today.

Dr. Thompson expressed that she has a network of leaders in her district that she worked with where she is preparing them for the next levels of their careers:

I identify, tap on the shoulder then I invite, and sometimes I have to pull.

Sometimes you have to say you can do this. I know you're comfortable right now in your classroom with the door closed, but it's more than that. We have to do more. So, it's been what has filled my cup of being able to work with younger women and get them moving through because it's not a whole lot, I have them all on two hands.

Dr. Adams shared how she had intentional conversations particularly with Black women leaders to let them know they are a valuable part of the team:

I think it's both probably informal and formal in Deweyville or in our district. For me personally, I'm more at the principal level in terms of my own mentorship or conversations I'm having with our leaders. So if there's a leader who's applying for a role in my cabinet or a leader who's building I'm visiting or talked to in a principal meeting, just having those extra conversations to check in particularly with my Black leaders or Black women leaders at particular moments in time.

Dr. Sullivan shared that in her district they have formal aspiring leadership programs:

We are creating our own pipeline for leadership and so we started transportation cohorts because I want bus drivers to see they can be supervisors of bus lots and, they can then move their way up because that's what happened with me. We have ALPS, an aspiring leaders program. In fact, I was at a school today and the

assistant principal was like hey, Dr. Sullivan, I'm in the ALPS program. So, we try to hire those people for principalships first.

Similarly, Dr. Rhodes worked with aspiring leaders and helped them as they aspire to that next level of leadership. She explained that she believed in the power of paying it forward because of everything she had experienced from others pouring into her. As servant leaders, it must be important to feed the pipeline of new emerging talent. Black women superintendents must prioritize giving back to those who are following their lead. That moral responsibility transcends many boundaries and emits a lasting legacy towards Black women empowerment.

Unapologetically Me. Collins (1989) contends that Black people must be accountable for their knowledge claims. It is essential for them to take a personal stance on issues and assume full responsibility for arguing their validity. The participants shared their personal stories on how they have operated unapologetically within their professional spaces. This theme was primarily derived in the narratives collected from the superintendent participants.

Dr. Adams discussed her ability to walk in any space and fit in. While, she is a Black woman her versatility and ability to code switch affords her the social capital to maneuver in and out of these spaces with ease. For example, she shared an experience of a comment she made during a staff meeting that caught the attention of most of the Black people in the room:

I also think it's helped me again living to my authentic self. I had a Black teacher comment on my Twitter where we had an all staff meeting last week. I didn't realize that I was saying this, but I think I said something like, "they can say what

they want to.” So on Twitter one of these Black teachers said, my favorite part was when you said “they can say what they want to.” I started cracking up and my assistant was like yeah I caught you saying that, so I just feel like I can with ease move in and out of the code switching, the different rooms I'm in and it all feels like me because it is all me.

This is a candid example of authenticity in the perceived context. When you are true to who you are then people believe what you say, and when they believe what you say, then they can buy into your vision as a leader. West et al. (2021) study indicates that the participants believed it was important to maintain a sense of cultural identity and noted their resisted pressures to conform, yet expressed their authenticity by refusing to code switch. One of the critical components for leaders who aspire to the role of superintendent is to know who you are and never deviate from that core existence.

Know your Net Worth. Dr. Goodman talked about the loads that Black women have been taught to carry, the toughness that our exterior emanates:

We have a level of vulnerability and culturally we've been taught to be tough. We've been taught not to show weakness. We've been taught that Black women just overcome. Whereas, other women can be the damsel in distress we have to change the tire. I'm not waiting for you to come change my tire I'm going to get out this car and change this tire. So, that's the way we've been raised. Honestly, to be the backbone to be the one that's carrying the load. I've just had to learn through mentorship and support that it's okay if things don't work out the way you wanted them to. You lift up, you dust off, and you keep going, and you don't give up on pursuing what it is that you want and what's for you simply because you

may get rejected or overlooked because you're a Black woman, or because other people don't recognize your worth. You have to be your own best advocate.

Dr. Sullivan shared an experience before she was sworn in to the superintendency where she reflected on what it meant for her to step in to the role of the superintendent:

He said your life is getting ready to change, but I want you to just sit for an hour and think about what it is that you firmly believe in and that you will not waiver on because that ultimately is what you go in this job with. That was deep for me. So, I look for aspiring women who know what it is you stand for because there will be lots of situations that are presented to you that you have to make a decision whether you're going against what you totally believe in your heart.

Both Dr. Adams and Dr. Goodman discussed their experiences coming in to the role of the superintendency where they negotiated their salary contracts. They were both the first African American women in their districts, so when they had to negotiate their contracts they relied on their professional mentors to help navigate them through the process. Dr. Goodman talked about her experience where she had to consider certain bonuses within her contract, such as requesting a driver, because of the perception it would give for her as a Black woman.

So, she had to search for a balance that would yield equitable to her valuation as an accomplished Black woman. Importantly, she knew she had to bring herself towards as much parity as the former White male superintendent in terms of pay. One of her mentors was adamant about her not accepting a salary less than a certain amount. She emphasized that she would be doing the same work that the White man before her was doing, so why should she accept anything less than what she was worth? The work is the

work, regardless of who sits in the seat. There is a job that still must get done. However, it is unfortunate that in the twenty-first century women still must fight for equality in gender pay. This is a topic where policymakers should convene to discuss ways to combat gender inequality in pay, and ways in which women are brought to parity with their men counterparts in the field of education.

In conclusion, the above mentioned themes align with the conceptual framework utilized to undergird the study. At every juncture, the stories produced by the participants yielded narrative accounts posited by the Black feminist epistemological framework. The meanings made from each individual and collective story broadened the scholarly literature on mentoring and its impact on the Black woman's experience as a superintendent and aspiring superintendent in their career trajectories.

Implications for Practice

In this section, I discuss the implications for practice based on the findings of the study. The implications for practice are non-exhaustive. Although the findings of the study assert that mentoring was a necessity for each participant as they navigated their path towards the superintendency, many Black women leaders lack mentors who can provide support and guidance in their career trajectories. This could be a result of the sparse representation of African American women superintendents who mentor those who aspire to the position. Equally important are the lack of supportive networks, both formal and informal, that Black women often do not experience as they navigate their career paths (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Harris-Muhammed, 2020). The implications for practice that can positively impact the outcomes for African American women who aspire to the superintendency are discussed in the next sections.

Aspiring Superintendents

The benefits of an effective mentoring relationship have proved valuable for African American women who aspire to the superintendency. It is important for African American women who aspire to the superintendency to seek out mentors early in their careers. As Black women leaders face the dualities of being both Black and woman in a field dominated by White men, research asserts that supportive networks are beneficial for Black women (Baker, 2018; West, 2017a). Mentoring can help to circumvent pitfalls and struggles that many Black women experience along their career journeys (Fields et al., 2019; Wyatt, 2019). Aspiring superintendents should consider “match and fit” when evaluating a mentoring relationship. While a mentor provides support and guidance to the mentee, it is also incumbent that the mentee be an active participant in the mentoring experience. Aspiring superintendents should seek mentors who share similar values, interests, and career goals which can help to foster an effective mentoring relationship.

In practice it is incumbent for aspiring superintendents to express a desire to be mentored. Once that desire is affirmed making sure that one is situated in a professional environment that will foster growth and development is necessary. The following explores attainable action steps to developing successful mentoring relationships:

- Find mentors who share similar beliefs and to some extent different beliefs who will provide a sense of nurture and support for one who aspires towards leadership positions. Additionally, be sure to seek a mentor early in your career.
- Be sure to communicate your needs and desires to promote your success towards your own professional growth.

- Mentors should provide mentees with access to influence and networks that can help to foster their growth and ascension towards positions that lead to the superintendency.
- Mentors also have a responsibility to identify and assess the needs of the mentee.
- As mentees reach certain levels of executive leadership they should seek sponsors who can help to navigate their paths through invisible networks that garner access to positions, such as the superintendence.
- Mentees should remain open to relying on a supportive network of people who can endorse and validate their professional experience.

As a result, Black women who aspire to the superintendency have an overt responsibility in some ways to create their own paths. They must be diligent in their efforts to persevere towards attaining a position that is traditionally held by White men. Maintaining meaningful mentoring relationships is essential to advancing one's personal and professional growth towards the superintendence.

District Leaders

As African American women continue to aspire towards the superintendency, it is essential that school districts provide formal training that helps to guide them along their career path. Districts should have contingent leadership programs that extend beyond principal pipelines. Studies indicate that the path for women towards the superintendency is often untraditional (Robinson et al., 2017; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). As the path for women tends to be alternative in nature, especially for African American women in their pursuit towards the superintendency, district leaders should implement formal training

programs that nurture alternative career paths. Those formal programs should identify potential aspiring superintendents, provide mentors and sponsors for those aspiring leaders, and provide robust on-the-job training, i.e. career rotations to help prepare them for the superintendency. Other recommendations for district leaders would be to:

- Engage aspiring superintendents to understand their career desires and perceived value to the educational organization.
- Provide access to influential networks for aspiring superintendents to meet and engage with other aspiring superintendents.
- Monitor and provide ongoing feedback to nurture their development towards the superintendency.
- Encourage measurable goals that allow forward progression for aspiring superintendents throughout their career trajectory.

These recommendations for district leaders would help to support African American women who aspire towards the superintendency to develop the necessary skills, confidence, and capacity to pursue steps towards attaining the superintendency.

Superintendent Preparation Programs

While many of the study participants shared that they participated in aspiring superintendent academies, they felt they needed more from the superintendent preparation program. Since mentoring has proved to be valuable for African American women in the role and for those who aspire to the superintendency, there should be a focused effort on behalf of preparation programs to go beyond holding monthly meetings where aspiring participants engage in panel discussions. Aspiring superintendents should be matched with current superintendents and provided opportunities to network, learn,

and grow in their leadership capacities. As a result of an immersive experience with their superintendent mentor, they should attain a sense of self-efficacy in their endeavors towards the superintendency.

Implications for Policy

The implications for changes in policy based on the findings are indicated in this section. Research indicates that women are disproportionately represented as superintendents in the United States (AASA, 2020; NCES, 2018). While gender disparities exist for women representation in the superintendency, women who attain the position experienced disparities in equal pay compared to their men counterparts (Chiefs for Change, 2020). The findings revealed that two of the superintendent participants engaged in salary negotiations when entering the superintendency in which they were not at parity with their male predecessors, in terms of salary. Further, they were advised by their attorneys to be creative in how they would seek “other” benefits within their salary packages. Notwithstanding, state policies within education should enact changes that afford women equal opportunities to equal pay as their men counterparts. As described in the findings, the work is the work no matter who’s doing it. In the twenty-first century, equal protections mandated by state policies should exist for women to achieve parity in gender pay with their men counterparts as they embark upon their pursuits towards liberty.

Implications for Future Research

While this qualitative study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of African American women superintendents and those who aspire to the superintendency, and their mentoring experiences, there are other research methodologies that can be

explored to enrich the extant literature. The scholarly literature presents a void to the voices of Black women who are at the center of their own discourse (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1989; Dillard, 2000; Stitt & Happel-Parkins, 2019). Thus, there are opportunities for future research to acknowledge and validate knowledge claims that emphasize the lived experiences of Black women leaders in education, specifically the superintendency. I provide recommendations for future qualitative and quantitative research in this section.

A recommendation for future research would be to situate this study in a specific geographic region to determine if the findings would deviate based on the local trends in that particular region for superintendents and for those who aspire to the role. It might be worth noting the perceived differences of mentoring for this group of African American women in different contexts in specified geographic locations, perhaps shedding light on the veracity of the impacts of mentoring while being an African American woman educational leader.

Another recommendation would be to conduct the study to include the participants' mentors and sponsors, to learn about the mentors and sponsors perceptions and desires to mentor African American women leaders. It would help to understand their motivations in grooming African American women for leadership. Lastly, because the sample size was so small the findings are not generalizable to the larger context of African American women aspiring superintendents and superintendents. So, future studies should include a larger sample size to recognize if the data is consistent with the current findings.

Additionally, quantitative researchers could explore a longitudinal study of African American women aspiring superintendents in a specific geographic region that emphasized participants' mentoring experiences at different levels of leadership along their career trajectory. It would be helpful to understand if they experienced substantial mentoring through their trajectory of leadership and the influence of mentoring, who mentored them at varying levels of leadership, i.e. race and gender, statistical analysis of a systemized developmental approach for aspiring superintendents within their school districts, the impact of their engagement in formal and informal networks, and the duration of time spent in each level of leadership before attaining the superintendency.

In turn, once they reached the superintendency quantitative data should continue to define their mentoring experiences—as a mentee and mentor. A thorough quantitative analysis to this research approach could definitely provide a framework for African American women who aspire to the superintendency, and possibly help to close the opportunity gap that exists for many African American women leaders. Similarly, the substantive knowledge that the research produces can strengthen the body of scholarly literature related to the significance of mentoring for African American women in educational leadership, specifically the superintendency.

Beyond the current educational scholarship on the superintendency, future research could further seek to explore quantitative research that focuses on African American women who engage in mentoring relationships within academia. The professional contexts for African American women who work in academia resembles much of the literature that expounds on the lack of productive mentoring for women of color in the superintendency. A study that situates the professional context of African

American women in academia to examine how they are mentored, who mentors them, and the effectiveness of mentoring on their career trajectory would be advantageous to understanding the trajectories for African American women in academia.

Limitations

There were limitations to the study that must be addressed to protect the reliability of the research. Because the study criteria focused on current African American women superintendents and aspiring superintendents, the limited number of superintendent participants could not yield an expansive dialogue from the few African American women superintendents in the United States, therefore, the findings are not generalizable. In as much, the perspectives of the lived experiences of the participants cannot reflect the lived experiences of all African American women superintendents and for those who aspire to the superintendency. Conjunctively, because the confluence of race and gender were important to understanding the lived experiences of African American women superintendents and those who aspire to the position, the sample size was smaller, which presented challenges to recruit participants. With these limitations, I interpreted the data as best I could to provide an in-depth analysis of these women's narrative accounts. I am hopeful that their stories encourage and inspire future leaders and researchers.

Conclusion

I conducted semi-structured interviews with three African American women superintendents and five African American women aspiring superintendents. I also held a focus group with two superintendents and one aspiring superintendent. These women resided across the United States. In the same vein, they lead various types of school districts—small, mid-sized, large, urban/suburban districts where the economic, political,

and systemic issues are wide spread. I sought to understand and explore the lived experiences and influences of mentorship for African American women superintendents and aspiring superintendents on their career trajectories.

The criteria to participate in the study was that they be an African American woman, who was a superintendent, or aspiring superintendent working in central office roles and cabinet level positions. Qualitative data were collected through interviews, a focus group, and field notes. The data was analyzed to provide informed knowledge to the body of educational leadership scholarship. The findings situated an analysis, while not generalizable that mentoring was essential for African American women in the superintendency and for those who aspire to the role. Other literature suggests that the reason African American women do not ascend to the superintendency is because of a lack of mentors (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Fields et al., 2019; Jenkins, 2019). While each of the participants shared accounts of their lived experiences as African American women navigating their career pathways, there is still a need to understand other perspectives that could influence the findings in different contexts, such as understanding the perceptions of the mentors and sponsors who mentored and guided the participants.

The findings suggest that African American women are still combating systemic struggles that predate them. In spite of the challenges Black women learn to persevere, it's how it has been since the beginning of time. This study showed that African American women are capable to break through the systemic barriers that tend to weed so many African American women out of educational scholarship and leadership. Becoming the "first" to do anything in the Black culture is remarkable. Although, African Americans are slowly gaining opportunities that have not been afforded to them

historically, there is still scant representation compared to other ethnicities. The participants in this study each demonstrated a strength, tenacity, and commitment to triumph even in the face of adversity. Their unyielding spirits and relentless pursuits is what catapulted them throughout their career trajectories. Their demonstrated examples to push forward should send a resounding message to other women who aspire to the superintendency.

Each of the participants filled my cup during their interviews. They each walk with a guiding light that shines brightly towards their passion and the communities they serve. The stories they each shared were captivating and gave voice to the traditionally silenced narrative of the Black woman. The knowledge, meaning, and validation they solicited will forever be a part of history. Researchers must continue to expose the narratives that enact meaning for Black women education leaders. Their stories are unique and can only be told with them at the center of their own discourse. And they're waiting for that seat at the table.

Appendix A

Recruitment Email Script

Dear Superintendent (Aspiring Superintendent):

I am contacting you today to gauge an interest in participating in a research study that will seek to understand the role of mentoring and impacts of mentorship as you have navigated your role in the superintendency. As a current doctoral student, my name is Robbin Clay, and I am working under the supervision of Dr. Bradley Davis at the University of Houston while conducting a qualitative, narrative study that will deepened the understanding of the lived experiences of African American women in the superintendency and for those aspiring towards the superintendency. The study will be conducted during the 2021-2022 school year. Currently, women occupy 27% of the nation's superintendents, while women of color occupy only 8% of the nation's superintendencies. This study seeks to explore the mentoring experiences that African American women encounter along their career pathway to the superintendency. The conceptual framework that the study will utilize is Black Feminist Thought. The constructs and frames of knowledge that BFT utilizes will help to make meaning of the everyday experiences of Black women to understand through analysis undergirded by the conceptual framework. I have included the required IRB consent form that further details the study.

If you wish to participate in the study, the time commitment will be minimal. I will ask to interview you to hear stories of your mentoring experiences along your career trajectory. The interview will be approximately 60-90 minutes. Because I also seek to understand the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to the

superintendency, I will ask for information of other women who meet the study criteria for an opportunity to interview them as well. Additionally, other artifacts that you may provide that may help to enrich the stories produced will be analyzed as supplemental documents to the study. No students will be interviewed for this study. The total time commitment will not exceed 90 minutes without your consent.

I sincerely hope that you consider taking part in this research study. It will help other women superintendents or those who aspire to the role in understanding the impacts of mentoring along their career journeys. If you choose to participate, please respond to this email. Should you agree I would like to schedule a time to speak with you to answer any questions you may have about the study, obtain electronic consent to proceed with the research, and to schedule a time for us to meet face-to-face or virtually via Microsoft Teams. If you do not wish to participate, no further action is required.

The production of knowledge is essential for educational scholarship. Hopefully, by sharing knowledge it will help other research scholars and practitioners to inform their work. Should you have any questions or require additional information, please email me at rsmanuel@cougarnet.uh.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration in participating in this study. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Robbin Clay
Ed. D. Candidate, University of Houston

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. The choice to participate is at your sole discretion. You may withdraw from participation in the study at any time by informing the primary researcher. No students will be interviewed in the study and no incentives will be provided for participation. Your responses will be kept completely confidential. Confidentiality will be upheld by using pseudonyms to make anonymous the participants' names and school district. Neither your name or the name of the school district will be disclosed by the student researcher in the final study report. In addition, all IRB compliance

and guidelines will be adhered to throughout the study. This research study has been reviewed by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol Questions

- Purpose of the study
 - To explore and understand the lived experiences and impact of mentorship on your career journey as an African American woman while navigating race, gender, and class oppressions.
- Explain the informed consent form
 - To build trust through sharing stories-All information is de-identified and pseudonyms will be provided for written data, participants will be provided transcripts to confirm validity of content.

Sample Group 1- Current Superintendent

Background Information

1. Tell me about yourself. Describe your current role, your leadership pathway, your career aspirations.
2. What were your educational experiences like growing up?
 - a. Describe your educational background (i.e. school demographics, cultural experiences, parental involvement).
3. What factors led you to pursue a position in educational leadership?
4. What factors led you to pursue the superintendency?
5. How would you define your role and responsibilities in your current role as a superintendent?

Race and Gender

6. As a Black woman, how has your race and gender identity shaped your educational and professional experiences?
7. Describe how you perceive your ability to perform the key responsibilities of the superintendency.
 - a. Can you explain the experiences that you have encountered that may have been difficult to navigate in your role?
 - b. Can you explain the experiences that you have encountered that you feel you have successfully navigated in your role?
8. What are the influences that you feel have helped you in your role as a superintendent?
 - a. What are your personal beliefs, ideals, and values that you deem important to sustaining and thriving in this role?

Mentoring

9. Describe your mentoring experiences throughout your career pathway.
 - a. Explain how those experiences have helped to shape you as a leader.
10. As a Black woman, how important do you feel mentorship and support are in navigating through your professional journey?
 - a. Describe the impacts that you have experienced personally and professionally as a result of mentorship? (Be sure to include specifics of the mentoring relationship)
 - b. How has that impact defined your knowledge claims while navigating your race, gender, and class as a Black woman?

- c. How do you make meaning of those notions?
- 11. What are the necessary components of successful mentoring relationships?
- 12. Do you have a natural desire to mentor those who may aspire to the
superintendency?
 - a. If so, do you feel it necessary to mentor those who share similar
backgrounds to yourself?
- 13. Before we conclude, are there any last thoughts that you would like to share?

Sample Group 2- Aspiring Superintendent

Background Information

- 1. Tell me about yourself. Describe your current role, your leadership pathway, your
career aspirations.
- 2. What were your educational experiences like growing up?
 - a. Describe your educational background (i.e. school demographics, cultural
experiences, parental involvement).
- 3. What factors led you to pursue a position in educational leadership?
- 4. Why do you aspire to the role of superintendent?
- 5. How would you describe your career pathway?
 - a. Do you feel that in your current role or previous roles that you were being
adequately prepared or groomed to move into the superintendency?

Race and Gender

- 6. As a Black woman, how has your race and gender identity shaped your
educational and professional experiences?

7. Describe experiences that you have faced where it may have been difficult to navigate along your career journey.
8. Describe experiences that you have faced where you have been successful along your career journey.
9. What are the influences that you feel have helped you in your current role or previous roles?
 - a. What are your personal beliefs, ideals, and values that you deem important to moving into the role of superintendent?

Mentoring

10. Describe your mentoring experiences throughout your career pathway.
 - a. Explain how those experiences have helped to shape you as a leader.
11. As a Black woman, how important do you feel mentorship and support are in navigating through your professional journey?
 - a. Describe the impacts that you have experienced personally and professionally as a result of mentorship? (Be sure to include specifics of the mentoring relationship)
 - b. How has that impact defined your knowledge claims while navigating your race, gender, and class as a Black woman?
 - c. How do you make meaning of those notions?
12. What are the necessary components of successful mentoring relationships?
13. If you were given the opportunity today to enter a superintendency, would you feel prepared to sustain and thrive in the position?
 - a. If so, describe the experiences that confirm these feelings.

14. Before we conclude, are there any last thoughts that you would like to share?

Appendix C

Focus Group Questions

Welcome/Introductions

Explain the purpose of focus group

- To allow organic, reflective dialogue between professional peers on their mentoring experiences

Questions:

1. What can you share with the group about your professional mentoring experiences along your career journey?
 - a. Struggles?
 - b. Wins?
2. What do you think are important elements of successful mentoring relationships?
3. How do you as a Black woman navigate your professional space in terms of support and mentorship?
4. How do we foster collaborative networks to support one another?
5. Explain your perspective in paying it forward to those who may aspire to be where you are today.
6. Share your thoughts on the current state of education. Do you feel that opportunities are surfacing for marginalized groups to move into educational leadership roles as a result?
 - a. Are there ample supports in place for mentorship to occur for those who may enter into these roles?
 - b. If not, how do you as leaders usher in change?

Appendix D



DIVISION OF RESEARCH
Institutional Review Boards

APPROVAL OF SUBMISSION

December 3, 2021

Robbin Clay
rsmmanuel@uh.edu

Dear Robbin Clay:

On November 9, 2021, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	The Lived Experiences and Impact of Mentorship of African American Women Superintendents and Those Aspiring Towards the Superintendency: A Narrative Study
Investigator:	Robbin Clay
IRB ID:	STUDY00003301
Funding/ Proposed Funding:	Name: Unfunded
Award ID:	
Award Title:	
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRP-502a, Category: Consent Form; • Interview Protocol, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.); • Recruitment Email, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Focus Group Questions, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.); • Demographic Questionnaire, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.); • Clay Consent Form.pdf, Category: Other; • CLAY Email Follow Up to Participate.pdf, Category: Other; • Demographic Profile Questionnaire.pdf, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.); • Focus Group Questions.pdf, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data

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	collection forms, etc.); • Interview Protocol .pdf, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.); • IRB Revised(2), Category: IRB Protocol;
Review Category:	Expedited
Committee Name:	Noncommittee review
IRB Coordinator:	Maria Martinez

The IRB approved the study on December 3, 2021; recruitment and procedures detailed within the approved protocol may now be initiated.

As this study was approved under an exempt or expedited process, recently revised regulatory requirements do not require the submission of annual continuing review documentation. However, it is critical that the following submissions are made to the IRB to ensure continued compliance:

- Modifications to the protocol prior to initiating any changes (for example, the addition of study personnel, updated recruitment materials, change in study design, requests for additional subjects)
- Reportable New Information/Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others
- Study Closure

Unless a waiver has been granted by the IRB, use the stamped consent form approved by the IRB to document consent. The approved version may be downloaded from the documents tab.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system.

Sincerely,

Research Integrity and Oversight (RIO) Office

University of Houston, Division of Research

713 743 9204

cphs@central.uh.edu

<http://www.uh.edu/research/compliance/irb-cphs/>

Appendix E

Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study

Title of research study: A Narrative Study on the Role of Mentorship in the Career Trajectory of African American Women Superintendents and Those Aspiring Towards the Superintendency

Investigator: Robbin Clay, Ed.D. Candidate, this project is part of a dissertation being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Bradley Davis, Ph.D.

Key Information:

The following focused information is being presented to assist you in understanding the key elements of this study, as well as the basic reasons why you may or may not wish to consider taking part. This section is only a summary; more detailed information, including how to contact the research team for additional information or questions, follows within the remainder of this document under the “Detailed Information” heading.

What should I know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Taking part in the research is voluntary; whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide, and can ask questions at any time during the study.

You are invited to take part in a research study on the lived experiences and impact of mentorship in your career trajectory towards becoming a superintendent or as an aspiring superintendent because you meet the following criteria:

- Are a superintendent or aspiring superintendent in an urban or suburban district in the United States.
- Are a Black women.
- Are able to articulate your lived experiences of mentorship in your career journey.

In general, your participation in the research involves:

- Consenting to participate;
- Completing a demographic survey;
- Participating in an interview with the researcher;
- Participating in a focus group with the researcher and other study participants;
- Validating the authenticity of the transcribed interviews;
- Providing any additional artifacts related to the research topic if available and allowable by your employer.

There are no known risks to you in taking part in this research study, which you can compare to the possible benefit of providing your perspective, experiences, and impact of mentorship to current and aspiring women superintendents to help inform their practice while contributing to scholarly research on the topic being studied. You will not receive compensation for participation in the study.

Detailed Information:

The following is more detailed information about this study, in addition to the information listed above.

Why is this research being done?

This research is being conducted to explore how African American women superintendents and aspiring superintendents experience mentoring. The goal is to understand their perspectives on its impact in their ascent to the superintendency and on its role in sustaining them through professional challenges. Few studies have examined African American women in educational leadership and their personal narratives on the specific impact of mentorship towards career advancement, in particular the superintendence. Since there are a limited number of African American women who hold the position of superintendent accounts of their mentoring experiences are minimal in scholarly literature. Examining the personal stories of individuals along this pathway may provide insight into their mentoring relationships, which in turn may better prepare those who aspire towards the superintendency.

How long will the research last?

We expect that this research study will take place over a period of six months. Each subject will participate in either a face to face or virtual interview, for approximately 60-90 minutes in a secure, safe location mutually agreed upon.

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll about fifteen people in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

- Potential subjects will be recruited via email. (Scripts for recruitment are submitted as supplemental materials)
- A timeline description of the procedures will be provided to the subjects.
- Once consent is received and subjects are selected, each subject will only interact with the researcher in an in-depth, semi-structured interview, using an approved set of questions to elicit your experiences with mentoring in your professional journey. (Interview questions are submitted as supplemental materials).
- 4-5 subjects will be asked to participate in a focus group with the researcher and other study participants, using an approved set of questions to reflect and engage in collaborative discussion with professional peers on your mentoring experiences in your professional journey. (Focus group questions are submitted as supplemental materials).
- Each interview is expected to last between sixty and ninety minutes with the possibility for a follow up interview should the researcher need clarification or further information.
- There will be one focus group which is expected to last between sixty and ninety minutes. The focus group will be conducted virtually with the researcher and other study subjects.
- The in-person research interview will take place at an agreed upon location between the subject and the researcher. Other interviews will take place virtually at a designated date and time agreed upon by the subject and the researcher.

- Each subject will be provided a transcript of their interview and the focus group to confirm the authenticity of the transcribed interview and focus group.
- The research will occur during Fall 2021 and Spring 2022.
- Each subject will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey electronically, via Qualtrics prior to the interview.
- Neither the survey, interview, or focus group contain sensitive subject matter, however, subjects may refuse to answer questions that make them feel uncomfortable.

This research study includes the following component(s) where we plan to audio record/video record you as the research subject: a personal interview, and/or follow up interview(s), and a focus group for the purposes outlined herein.

- ☐ I agree to be audio recorded/video recorded during the research study.
 - ☐ I agree that the audio recording/video recording can be used in publication/presentations.
 - ☐ I do not agree that the audio recording/video recording can be used in publication/presentations.
- ☐ I do not agree to be audio recorded/video recorded during the research study.

Since the audio recording/video recording of the interview and focus group will be transcribed, and the transcription will provide an official record of the research, a subject may not participate if they do not agree to be audio/video recorded.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can choose not to take part in the research and it will not be held against you. Choosing not to take part will involve no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled. Your alternative to taking part in this research study is not to take part.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you. If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator so that the investigator can remove your portion of the data collected up to the point of dismissal. If you stop being in the research, already collected data that still includes your name or other personal information will be removed from the study record.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

We do not expect any risks related to the research activities. If you choose to take part and undergo a negative event you feel is related to the study, please contact the researcher.

Will I receive anything for being in this study?

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include, increasing the understanding of the impact of mentorship for a marginalized group of people, specifically for African American women in their experiences in the role of superintendent and for those who aspire towards the position. This research seeks to inform educational leaders by providing personal accounts of African American women who share their lived experiences of the

impact of mentorship in their career journeys that may help others who seek to advance their careers, specifically to the role of superintendent.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information private, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. Each subject's name will be paired with a code number, which will appear on all written study materials. The list pairing the subject's name to the code number will be kept separate from these materials. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and other representatives of this organization, as well as collaborating institutions and federal agencies that oversee our research.

We may share and/or publish the results of this research. However, unless otherwise detailed in this document, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

Can I be removed from the research without my OK?

The person in charge of the research study can remove you from the research study without your approval, if deemed necessary.

What else do I need to know?

Participants will be provided with their transcribed interview to approve their content prior to submission. Once the project is completed and the thesis is approved, each subject will be provided access to the document.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, you should talk to the research team at (713) 743-9204 or cphs@central.uh.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may also talk to them at (713) 743-9204 or cphs@central.uh.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

May we contact you regarding future research opportunities?

In the future, our research team may be interested in contacting you for other research studies we undertake, or to conduct a follow-up study to this one. There is never any obligation to take part in additional research. Do we have permission to contact you to provide additional information?

☐ *Yes*

☐ *No*

I have read the consent information and agree to take part in the research study.

☐ *Yes*

☐ *No*

Your electronic signature documents your consent to take part in this research study. It is not necessary to return this document to the Principal Investigator.

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