ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS: ARE WE BEING MARGINALIZED?

Arleen M. Kennedy. Doctor of Education, December 2019

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The purpose of this qualitative research was to present African American women superintendents’ narrative experiences and analyze the challenges they faced in their positions. The researcher explored the marginalization of the African American woman by discussing androcentrism, ethnocentrism and intersectionality. The researcher explored whether race and gender served as factors in the marginalization of the African American women in the role of the school district superintendent. The review of the literature included research related to stereotypes about race and gender African American women face as they strive for executive positions in school districts. The research was designed to present the theories, which connect race and gender, and expand upon the perceived marginalization of African American women.

The sample included 11 African American women superintendents, across the United States, who participated in the data collection. Participants completed the Leadership Self-Assessment Survey and participated in an eight-question interview of approximately 75 to 80 minutes either via Facetime or Skype. This researcher utilized a hybrid thematic analysis of the data to find common themes that described the experiences of the superintendents. Data analysis revealed that when the superintendents self-reflected on their practices, they assessed themselves high in preparation for the role
of superintendent, but identified their organizational skills and ability to develop other team member skills as their growth areas.

Findings from this study also warrant further research of the barriers African American women face in top executive positions in education.
AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: ARE WE BEING MARGINALIZED?

By

Arleen M. Kennedy

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AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: ARE WE BEING MARGINALIZED?

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DEDICATION

The completion of a task of this magnitude comes with determination, perseverance, and support that comes from many sources. This dissertation is dedicated to three people: the late Mrs. Willia Mae “Big Red” Kennedy, an ever-present mother, who always recommended that I set my sights higher than the normal; Justin Kennedy, a son who gave me a reason to strive to be the best, and Mrs. Hannah Kennedy-Green, a sister who provided me with the time, space, and opportunity to complete this body of research.

In addition, I dedicate this completed product to my best friend and significant other who has loved me through the process and was a consummate cheerleader. A special dedication goes out to Mr. and Mrs. William (Louise) Bryant and the Bryant family, all of my aunts, uncles, cousins (1st, 2nd and 3rd generations) as they truly inspire me to be the best that I can be and always support my dreams.
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I thank my committee for their guidance and support. Dr. Warren Hayman, might or might not, recall my struggle to get the information for admissions submitted, but he saw my perseverance and never let me give up. Dr. Glenda Prime, whose course gave me my first reality check, empowered me to realize how important my work would be for my growth and for the reputation of the university to produce quality dissertations.

Dr. Jo Evans-Coleman, a special acknowledgement, for the one who supported me from the beginning until the end and was instrumental in empowering me to keep the faith. Dr. Evans-Coleman kept reminding me of the importance of my work, and she let me know in many ways that she believed in my ability to do the work.

This doctoral experience enabled me to join an elite group of people. I am always going to remember that I belong in the group, and I will always endeavor to represent the group well.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education reported that women represented 51% of the population in the nation in 1996 (United State Department of Education, 2008). Women in 2000 represented 65% of the teachers in the nation and 43% of the principals in the nation (Alston, 2005). Despite being the majority gender in the nation, less than one-fifth of women in the education system served as school district superintendents (Alston, 2005; p. 675). Many women who possessed the credentials to be school superintendent often found themselves being overlooked for the executive position (Glass, & Brunner, 2000). An inquiry into college preparation programs indicated that educational leadership Master’s degree or doctoral programs matriculated a significant pool of credentialed women candidates. Yet women superintendents still only averaged about 21.7 percent of the positions in the nation (Glass, & Brunner, 2000). It was important that this research began by exploring the development of women as they ascended into leadership roles and subsequently, the development of African American women to determine if there are factors that can support the claim that women are marginalized in their role as superintendent in school districts across the United States.

The role of women: The traditional view of women. The traditional role expectation of women helped the researcher to illustrate the hierarchal structure that society perceived as justification for women, in general, to be marginalized and later for the double impact of marginalization in the presence of African American women, specifically as school district superintendents.

The role of women has always been defined by a hierarchal structure that places women in a secondary position to men. In Figure 1, the placement of women has been seen in the sub-centric view of secondary to men.
The illustration also shows that African American women are relegated to a lower level on the hierarchy because of the double impact of being a woman and being African American.

Research revealed that women were not serving in many executive positions as school superintendents as men because the superintendency was considered a male position (Kowalski, T. J., McCord, R. S., Petersen, G. J., Young, I. P., & Ellerson, N. M., 2010). Gilman (1911) wrote:
Women have held the place of a preposition in relation to man. Acting on this assumption, all human standards are based on male characteristics. To the man, the whole world was his world; his because he male; and the whole world to the woman was the home; because she was female. She had her prescribed sphere, strictly limited to her feminine occupations and interests.

Previous research also discussed the idea that the institutions of family, religion, and gender intersect (Edgell & Danielle, 2007) and as such, women are found to be subjugated to men. Subjugating leads to systemic oppression of women, especially when women seek leadership roles. Patriarchal views and power tend to shape the construction of leadership, its culture, discourse, imaging, and practices for centuries (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001). As the family structure is considered an important institution in society, the influence of the responsibilities of the family tended to stagnate the opportunity for women to take on leadership roles in early American society. To further complicate the issue, religious ideology concerning the family stratified gender roles defined behaviors and expectations of women (Cott, 2002).

This research extended the examination of women in society, their matriculation into leadership roles, and the subsequent perspective of African American women superintendents who believe their leadership roles will continuously be marginalized.

**The Women’s Movement.** The Women’s Movement began the quest for fair treatment in the professional environment in the mid-20th century (Chisamya, DeJaeghere, Kendall, & Khan, 2012). The women’s movement in the United States brought into the forefront the debate about the changing role of a woman, and created symbolic representations of women that illustrated the struggle to develop the importance
of the role of women in society. Societal beliefs suggested that in law, customary practice, and in cultural stereotypes, women’s selfhood was systematically subordinated, diminished, and belittled, when it was not outright denied (Myers, 2005). The movement was successful in the passage of the Women’s Educational Equity Act (WEEA) of 1974 (Conrad, Dixson, Smooth, & Revilla, 2014). The WEEA is significant to the role of women in the United States as this legislation would create the opportunity for women to remove the barriers that impact their opportunities. Unfortunately, the movement did not account for women of color, who during this time were still serving in majority service roles (Ervin, 2017). Crenshaw (1989) suggested that the African American women’s quest for leadership roles was addressed as an afterthought of the feminists’ movement.

The mainstream epistemology about women in educational leadership roles was constructed, canonized, and theorized from a white hegemonic female perspective (Grimes, 2005). This epistemology is partial in the notion that human beings have about societal roles, making the presence of African American women marginal in importance because they were still factored of low importance in hierarchal order. As such, research on African American women in leadership was limited. When asked about why women, in general, have leadership issues, Klauke (1990), a researcher who discussed social stratification in education, simply stated, “Women teach, men lead” (p. 20). Klauke posits the premise that roles like the superintendent position typically are seen as masculine because the position requires that the leader is one people will follow. Klauke argued that people typically are not inclined to follow a woman’s lead.

**The African American Superintendent.** Since the initial discussion of this research was to outline the role of women in leadership, there must also be a discussion
of the role of African American men in the leadership position. An examination of the presence of men and women African Americans as school superintendents provided evidence to dispute any counterclaim that African American women, in specific, were not being marginalized as school district leaders. New bodies of research centered on the emergence of the African American male in the role of superintendent and explored whether or not African American males could ultimately dominate the school district leadership position. These new debates challenged various assertions about the role of leadership being just about men versus women. Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) contended that, based on Klauke’s assertion, African American women often found the role of leadership to be more challenging than any other racial or ethnic group combined.

In 2013, the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) found that, out of the 13,629 school systems across the United States, about 2.6% of these chief administrators were African American (see Figure 2):

![AFRICAN AMERICAN SUPERINTENDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES](image)

*National Alliance of Black School Educators: Directory of African American Superintendents,

*Figure 2. Percentage of African American Superintendents in the United States*
This means 354 superintendents were African American and less than 145 were African American women. In fact, of the largest 100 school systems in the United States, only 23 were led by African American superintendents of any gender and only six by African American women (NABSE, 2013).

The data below in Figure 3 illustrate the regions in which the superintendency had the highest representation of African Americans at the time of this study. Additionally, the findings below, presented at 39th Annual NABSE Conference, illustrated a disproportionate number of school district leaders who identified with ethnic minority school district populations.

**Percentage of African American Superintendents by State Demographics**

*National Alliance of Black School Educators: Directory of African American Superintendents,

In 2014, the number of African American male superintendents increased to 363, the 145 women remained constant.

**Social justice reform and the call for African American Women superintendents.** As the need for school district reform emerges and calls for social justice measures to improve the quality of education being provided for students, the impact of the superintendents' race and gender had a profound effect on understanding
the experiences of African American women as school district leaders. Their experiences highlighted perspectives that stakeholders held that ultimately influenced the challenges the African American women faced. Katz (2012) stated, “It is my contention that [African American] women superintendents have an interesting perspective on issues of social justice because of the experiences they had relative to discrimination based on gender, class, and race in achieving, maintaining and thriving as superintendents.”

Despite having strong education credentials, African American women are not regarded as being highly qualified (Brown, 2011). Early in 2003, when statistics showed that 17% of public school principals were African American women, this was the highest representation of African American women in educational leadership roles (Celestin, 2003, p. 20). This was also a time when the image of school district superintendents were not seen as representative of the student population and this issue was being challenged by African American women seeking the district leadership role (Garn & Brown, 2008).

Brunner and Grogan (2007) contended a need occurred to study potential reasons for the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership positions of school districts because dominant discourse on persons of color is limited because their experiences fall outside of normal profiles of superintendents. Many stereotypes existed that characterized African American women and influenced their ability to acquire and maintain positions as school superintendent.

In 2017, the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) compiled a list of African American school superintendents. This list reflected that African American women school superintendents represented less than one percent of the entire United States population. Of the over 14,000 school superintendents, only 103 of the positions
are led by African American women (NABSE, 2017). Figure 4 illustrates the geographic representation of states in the United States with African American women superintendents, including the number of positions in each state:

![Figure 4. States with African American Women Superintendents](image)

*Note: The states comprise a compiled unpublished listing. SOURCE: National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2017*

As the map shows, only 24 states in the United States host an African American woman superintendent; this is an indication that less than half of the country has African American women in the school district leadership positions in education. Yet Figure 5 below illustrates that a larger percentage of African American students across the United States attend all school districts than those African American women reflected in the
highest executive leadership position. According to the map, only 20% of the United States has school districts with less than 2.5% African American student populations.

![Map of the United States showing the percentage of school districts with African American students.]

Figure 5. States with African American students in school districts


In comparison to Figure 4, 48% of the states in the U.S. have at least one African American woman superintendent, but 80% of the school districts in the nation have African American populations. The fact that majority of the nation’s school population was African American, yet the presence of African American women superintendents as district leader was small further emphasized Klauke’s (1990) research about the role or lack thereof women in leadership. Klauke’s contention showed no change as the research surrounding the marginalized presence of African American women superintendents
began to evolve. These figures showed that there is a need for an increased number of African American women superintendents to reflect the ever-growing population of African American students in school districts (Kowalski & Björk, 2005).

The purpose of the research was to examine the experiences of African American Women School Superintendents as they discuss if there was marginalization that keep the representation of African American Women in the role of school district superintendents small. Further discussion was intended to determine the perspective reasons given for this marginalization of African American women in this top executive position.

The superintendent’s role. The role of a school superintendent is to supervise a school system. Often referred to as the chief school administrator (AASA, 2014), the school superintendent must manage the overall needs of the students whom they are charged with educating based upon their assessment of the district challenges and/or concerns. A superintendent must also oversee the daily operations of the school system. The superintendent reports to a collective body, the school board, as the board responds to the needs of its constituents, the schools and their communities. As such, the position comes with a high degree of political influence that must be navigated by a well-trained leader who ultimately can guide the school district into success.

The road to the superintendency. In effort to determine if there was evidence to support a claim of intentional marginalization of the presence of African American women in the role of superintendent, an examination of the pathway to the superintendency was important to this study because it helps to determine if marginalization occurs in the process of hiring superintendents by school boards. In a 2000 study of the pathway to becoming a school district superintendent, it was found that
54% of superintendent candidates are found through a search committee from each site (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2001). The search committee is typically led by two or more board members who have at their disposal, a devised job description of the ideal candidate; they use this job description to work with district stakeholders (i.e., community members, parents, teachers, and other district staff members) to implement the selection process. Glass et. al (2001) added that although boards of education members in many small districts perform as their own search committee, larger urban districts tend to utilize search firms, also known as headhunters, to select their candidate pool. These independent search committees are used to present an unbiased selection process to potential candidates as team members are not considered stakeholders in the selection process. The association also reported that the search committee reports findings, but many school boards do not want to hire women and particularly minority women though the search committee recommends them, because 76% of the boards feel that women are not capable of running districts (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2001). It became evident that school boards tended to exercise race and gender bias when making hiring decisions that affected the selection of a candidate who governed their school systems (Hunter & Donahoo, 2005).

**Career pathway to superintendent position.** In addition to determining if there was marginalization in the process, it is important to this study to examine the career trajectory to determine if marginalization was a result of the trajectory leading to the top school district leadership position. Björk (2000) cited that the most common pathway to a position as a school superintendent is from teacher to principal to central office administrator and then to superintendent. According to Björk, this pathway accounts for
approximately 49% of superintendents. Kim and Brunner (2009) later studied the similarities and differences between men and women ascending to the position of superintendent using Bjork’s trajectory. It was determined that there was a direct link between high school principal, central office administrator, and deputy superintendent in the process of ascending to the superintendent position; yet, Kim et al. (2009) found the pathway had a stark difference in the pathway for men as opposed to the pathway for women. Figure 6 illustrates the comparison of the pathways to superintendency for both men and women:
Figure 6. Comparative Analysis of Women vs. Men Ascending to the School Superintendency

*Note.* From (Kim & Brunner Model, 2009)
Kim et al. (2009) identified four comparative trends in the pathways. First, women’s ascension to the superintendency was more horizontal than diagonal, with more experience at the school level being required to ascend the ranks. Second, women tend to cluster and stagnate near the middle of the Kim-Brunner model, meaning they are often stuck at mid-level positions. Third, men tend to hold more high-level positions like deputy, associate, assistant and school superintendent without having to ascribe to having multiple experiences in low-level positions. Fourth, men could reach the superintendency directly from being a secondary school principal whereas women could not. This suggested that there could be evidence to support marginalization by the mere fact that the trajectory was based upon a theory that did not represent a significant number of African American women and could not be represented efficiently in a model where their presence was already limited.

**Statement of the Problem**

The theory of Intersectionality will present an initial view as to why African American women are considered marginalized in their role as school district superintendents.

The problem that this researcher seeks to discuss is the marginalization and underrepresentation of African American women in the role of a school district superintendent by sharing their experiences as superintendent and their perception of the cause of the challenges that they experienced.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of African American women superintendents who are maintaining their executive role and responsibilities as
this research sought to explore the challenges, if any, in their experiences and to discuss the importance of recognizing these challenges of African American women superintendents’ experiences in terms of how their experiences impact their leadership.

As the professional experience of each participant varied, the researcher identified commonalities and reflected upon future implications of maintaining the highest position in school districts.

**Research Question(s)**

Information provided by this research addressed the issue of how race and gender, intersect and compound the experiences of African American women superintendents, and proposes the following research question(s):

1. How do African American women who have attained the superintendency in school districts describe their professional experiences?
2. To what extent do African American women superintendents attribute their experiences to race, gender and intersectionality?

**Theoretical Framework**

The marginalization of African American women in the executive leadership position of the school superintendent was the theoretical framework for this research. Experiences of African American women superintendents derived through various research venues suggested reasons for the negative aspects of the experiences during their tenure. One source suggested that as African American women begin to take on the role of superintendent “there are competing agendas that place race at the center of the marginalization while simultaneously considering gender (Alston 2005). The support of
the theoretical framework for this study presented Intersectionality, and how societal constructs intersected to marginalize the African American woman superintendent.

As a part of this research, an independent examination of race and gender was presented to provide supporting evidence that the marginalization of African American women superintendents was a series of combined variables that influences the experiences of African American women in the superintendent position.

**Intersectionality.** Intersectionality focused on the issues that arose as race and gender intersected and how this led to the marginalization of African American women as they seek to compete for executive positions, particularly in educational leadership.

Intersectionality as it is first coined in 1989, explained Kimberlee Crenshaw’s perspective on how systems of oppression emerged (i.e. racism, sexism, and classism) that interwove and impeded the professional growth of the African American women. Although classism is an integral part of the matrix of domination, this research does not focus on classism because of the insignificant role it plays in the experiences of school superintendents. The superintendency position suggests a level of power that also contradicted the existence of classism and could provide a counterclaim against the existence of marginalization towards African American women in the role of superintendent.

Androcentric and Ethnocentric views were also included in the research as it explored the belief of a dominant culture that reflects the white male perspective and displaces African American women and relegates her position to lowest class of society.

Androcentric bias, according to Shakeshaft (1989b), occurs “when the research on the experiences of individuals in society is presented solely from the male perspective”
Shakeshaft added that such presentation is not only inaccurate, but devalues the perspective of the female experience. The concept of androcentrism was first articulated in the early 20th century by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1911) who wrote *The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture*. In the text, Gilman discusses how in the human scheme of things, “men are held as the human type and woman a sort of accompaniment and subordinate assistant, merely essential to the making of people” (p. 20). Gilman presses further to say, “[it is] what we are born into and grow up with. We assume to be the order of nature” (p. 21).

Ethnocentric bias is defined as “the view that one’s own group is the center of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.” Shone (2004) identified William G. Sumner, in 1906, as the first to coin the term *ethnocentrism* as a word. As a sociologist considered to subscribe to Social Darwinist thought and as an evolutionary thinker, Sumner often referred to less-superior groups as savages and explained that he viewed savages as “residing a step or three down the evolutionary ladder” (p. 698). For the purpose of this research, ethnocentrism explains the devaluation, in specific, of African American women’s perspective and role in education. Wynne (1990) suggested this was intentional so as to not have to address African American women and their contribution to education because it was seen as the proverbial elephant in the room.

**Significance of the Study**

Fuller (2016) explored how, in the past, much of the research focused solely on school leadership and the barriers that African American women faced in simply being a
school leader. He agreed with Brooks (2007) contention that African American superintendents have no real research dedicated to their experiences.

Findings from this study could be used to inform African American women who are aspiring to become superintendents of the challenges that may occur during their tenure. Findings could be used as well to inform the stakeholders about biases against women as they advocate for new leadership in the school system. The significance of this study is to explore the experiences of African American women who have achieved the superintendency and to discuss the commonalities among their challenges and barriers within the scope of the position.

**Research Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of African American women during their tenure as school superintendent. Through a narrative discussion of their experiences as African American women in the role of the superintendent, this research shared the stories of the women and their perspective on the claim of marginalization. The interviews conducted determined if African American women superintendents’ experiences provided evidence of marginalization of the African American women in the school district leadership role.

**Research design.** The study results were presented as a narrative inquiry by which the common themes of the participants provide contextual substance to the claim that African American women were marginalized in their role as superintendent. Schultz (2006) discussed in his social phenomenology how “people living in a world of daily life are able to ascribe meaning to a situation.” Schultz referred to the belief that when studying qualitative research, narrative analyses provided the highest degree of clarity by
providing meaning to a research question through human actions. The perspectives of the participant will uphold this through description of what they perceived their roles to be versus what they experienced while serving in this leadership capacity.

**Selection of participants.** The participants in this study were African American women superintendents. The sample derived from a pool of superintendents across the United States found in a listing of African American superintendents in the unpublished 2017 *National Alliance of Black School Educators* directory. The intent was to survey a sample population that could speak to their own understanding of the claim of marginalization in the role of an African American women superintendent. The sample selected raised the issue of marginalization and inspired more research.

**Instrumentation and Data Collection.** The intended data collection timeframe was 10 weeks. Through a two-part process, the participants completed a Leadership Self-Assessment Survey in which the participants revealed their views on their performance as a school superintendent. Participants had the option of completing the self-assessment questions at their leisure during the collection period. Additionally, a semi-structured Skype/FaceTime interview was performed that included a series of eight open-ended questions to address the research question(s). It was important to use open-ended questions as Yin (2003) stated, “open-ended interview questions enable researchers to retrieve specific facts as well as the opinions of the participants.” The intent was to use the data collected to identify common trends within the participants’ experiences and to develop a narrative that proposed a conceptual understanding of the reasons why African American women are underrepresented in the role of school district superintendents.
The protocol for the process included disaggregating the survey data to provide empirical evidence to support the subsequent interview. The 45 minute interview of each participant was audio recorded and later transcribed. After collecting the data, the themes that emerged were categorized, synthesized, and interpreted to illuminate the experiences. This process provided the researcher with the opportunity to focus and shape the study, based solely on the perceptions presented in the data. Pseudonyms were used in reference to all participants throughout the study to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

**Data analysis.** This researcher analyzed the data simultaneously between the leadership self-assessment and the interview. Analysis conducted using a thematic analysis approach in which the self-assessment responses and the interview responses provided the combined narrative evidence needed for answers to the research questions. Researchers suggested that thematic analysis is a search for important themes to illuminate the characteristics of the phenomena (Daly, Kellchear, & Gliksman, 1997; Patton & Patton, 2002). In addition, the participants’ reflections strengthen the face validity and credibility of the research. Using the thematic analysis provided for finding the themes generated through the instrumentation.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. One of the most significant limitations was the willingness of the sample to participate in the study during the data collection period. Another limitation was the results identified the experiences of only those African American women who responded and volunteered to participate in the study. The sample size, as determined by the response rate of participant(s), limited some
findings that could be important in addressing the phenomena. Finally, the design of the study, the researcher’s bias, and the data collection process were ancillary limitations.

**Delimitations**

As this researcher looked for the experiences of African American women superintendents during their tenure as chief executives of school districts, data collection resulted from women superintendents who served as a school district chief administrators. The primary goal of this study was to discuss the experiences of the superintendents over the course of their tenure; therefore, this study did not include interim superintendents who were not officially appointed, or previous superintendents who had separated from the position, voluntarily or otherwise dismissed. This distinction provided the specific context by which African American women found themselves underrepresented as district chief executives.
Definition of Terms

_African American women_: Defined as “women of color,” African American women will be used as the term to describe the sample population as well as the focus of this study (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

_Androcentrism_: Androcentrism is the treating of males as the main characters in the drama of human life around whom all action revolves and through whose eyes all reality is to be interpreted. Androcentrism could also mean the treating of the male as if he were some kind of universal, objective, or neutral representative of the human species. For the sake of this research, the term was used to describe theory of male domination in society (Bem, 1993).

_Border crossing_: Border crossing describes a case study in which a study participant venture[d] into a district whose student population was very different from that of a school district where [the participant] spent 24 years as a teacher and administrator. The term border crossing used in this study, identifies one of the barriers that African American women encounter when school boards attempt to justify their lack of choosing a qualified African American woman candidate (Hill-Collins, 1993).

_Ethnocentrism_: The concept of ethnocentrism is the highest level of racism and xenophobia that is not the product of an isolated act but an orchestrated effort by the dominant society to wage war against people, who by virtue of their race and/or ethnicity are reduced at best to half-citizens (Bartolome, 1997). For the sake of this study, ethnocentrism will be used to describe a bias against the racial/ethnic background of the participants discussed in the research.

_Intersectionality_: The term intersectionality describes how social inequality is experienced as an intersection of several forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989).
Intersectionality will be discussed as a social construct that impacts the lived experiences of African American female school superintendents who found discriminatory practices that plagued their tenure.

**Otherness:** Otherness identifies the justification for the oppressive practices implemented by the dominant culture. Morrison discusses in her work the significance of persons of Eurocentric descent seeing immigrants as others that do not belong to the United States. Morrison says that in order for the other cultures to belong, they must give up a portion of their identity (Morrison, 2017).

**Social justice:** The term social justice was described as Katz (2012) contended that women superintendents have an interesting perspective on issues of social justice due the experiences she maintains that women have from race, gender and class discrimination. Social justice reform sought to address such issues (Katz, 2012).

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional and personal experiences of African American women superintendents during their tenure as school district leader; and to document the commonalities found in their experiences that illuminate the idea of the marginalization, if any, on African American women superintendents. The researcher examined how African American women could be marginalized through social injustice practices because of racism, genderism, and the intersectionality of the two. As Katz (2004) pointed out in her research, women remain in the lower ranks of social hierarchy when compared to the male counterparts, who are thought to be more effective and efficient leaders. Within female-dominated professions such as education, males still hold the highest-ranking offices and are more likely to
attain a superintendency positions more readily than women. For example, approximately 40% more men than women receive appointments as superintendents. Daye (2007) contended that the statistic increased when one considered African American women as potential superintendents. Many qualified women candidates found themselves unable to have experiences as superintendent, because women, and in particular African American women, still worked through societal constructs and the bias perceptions of school boards in order to generate an increase in their presence in the leadership position. Wrushen and Sherman (2008) continued the support of this premise by suggesting that raising the consciousness of gender issues was necessary, important, and should have been examined sooner. These researchers suggested that both race and gender served as reasons to marginalize African American women.

**Societal perceptions and the marginalized effect.** Serving as the highest official in a school district is still considered a position relegated to men because societal perceptions of women have marginalized their contributions to education to the role of teacher or advisor (Björk, 2000). Implications from research studies suggested that examining the experiences of African American women could assist in understanding why a small percentage of women hold the superintendent’s position and specifically, why African American women are increasingly marginalized (AASA, 2007; Daye, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2007).
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discuss the marginalization of African American women in the school district superintendent position in the United States. Shakeshaft (1989) concluded in her research that although research about women in educational administration is growing, there is a paucity of research related to blacks in the superintendency, and even less on black women in the superintendency. The experiences of the superintendents should be documented to note whether there is marginalization created by variables that impact the experiences of these superintendents as they try to lead school districts to successful outcomes.

The intent of this literature review is twofold: First, it is to provide an overview of the dialogues in the field of education that outline the general interpretation of the significance of the role of the superintendent in K-12 school systems. Secondly, this review looks at literature of researchers who specifically investigate the multiple ways that African American women superintendents experience similar forms of marginalization, not only as leaders in individual districts but in their broader role as African American women who are represented among superintendents across the United States. Additionally, within this portion of the literature review, complaints of normalized acts of aggression that African American women superintendents experience daily in school systems (Hughes & Berry, 2012; Nespor, 1997; Watkins, 2001; & Woodson, 1933) will be explored. This is important for at least the following reasons: First, most school systems still largely follow top-down leadership models and when superintendents are regular targets of marginalization and emotional violence, the trickle-down impact on
the district are profound. Second, as scholars like Cooper (1892), DuBois (1903), Omi and Winant (2015), Nespor (1997), Watkins (2001), and Woodson, (2016), to name a few, have argued, sociocultural norms and values are deeply entangled in the fabric of institutions like school systems. When marginalization is normalized from the top-down in the district, such values are also generally espoused in the broader community. Thinking deeply about these connections as acts of racism and sexism ontologically and epistemologically impact the superintendent and becomes significant for unpacking cultures of exclusion in school systems.

The role of the superintendent of a school district is to serve as the chief executive officer of the system. The superintendent hires his/her executive staff and serves as an integral part in hiring the principals of the schools in the system. Superintendents report to a governing board and must oversee the fiscal and operational systems of the district and are responsible for the overall well-being of the students in the district. Western Reserve University president Charles Thwing (1898) described that superintendents were, “rendering a service to the people far greater than that which any other citizen was rendering” (p. 30). This, however, was not the original understanding of the role of the superintendent. In the late 1830s, when the first school superintendent was appointed in Buffalo, New York, and Louisville, Kentucky the position of superintendent had no definitive roles or responsibilities.

Callahan (1966) would attempt to characterize superintendents into five role conceptualizations: the teacher-scholar, the organizational manager, the democratic leader, an applied social scientist, and a communicator (Bjork et al., 2014; Grieder, Pierce, & Jordan, 1969). Bjork et al. surmised that according to Callahan (1966), the
school superintendent was characterized as a teacher-scholar (1850 to early 1900s). He explained that the superintendent had to understand the importance and goals of education. Joseph Rice (1892) emphasized that the importance of a school superintendent “cannot be overestimated” (p.11). Rice believed that a superintendent had to be a teacher or scholar in the pedagogy of education.

Callahan indicated that from the 1900s to 1930s the superintendent was the organizational manager who simply oversaw the system and its practices. Callahan (1966) contended that superintendents had to be able to demonstrate an understanding of the strategic goals of the district and be able to manage the deliverable actions that accomplish the goals set forth (Callan & Levinson, 2011; Harvey, Camborne-McCabe, Cunningham, & Koff, 2013; Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005; Kowalski, 2006). This would suggest that superintendents were simply managers of daily activities in the schools. Whitmore (2008) emphasized that within this concept, “it is imperative that we not forget the critically important management of the district” (p. 67).

By the mid-1950s, the role changed again to reflect a superintendent as a democratic leader whose role was to project fairness in his governance of the district. The role changed once more as an applied social scientist from the mid-1950s to mid-1970s (p. 9). However, Bjork and Rogers (1999) stated, “[A] fifth role, communicator (mid-1970s to present), was added by Kowalski (2006)” (p. 9). In fact, when Kowalski McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2010) discussed the fifth role, the researchers contended, “The contemporary superintendent is expected to wear five different hats and she or he is expected to know when to transition among the roles” (p.5). It would be at this time that the image of the superintendent started to evolve. And as with the evolution
of school reform through the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) legislation, many school boards and districts began to realize that the role of the school superintendent needed to be reformed as well. One group of researchers stated, “The old, less visible role of the school superintendent has changed to that of a highly visible chief executive who needs vision, skills, and knowledge to lead in a new and complex world” (Hoyle et al. 2005, p. 1). In fact, Kowalski et al. (2010) concluded,

By 2010, most school district superintendents realized that their responsibilities in relation to school reform had expanded, requiring them to both design and carry out needed changes. Specifically, they had become responsible for determining what needed to be improved and for deciding how improvement initiatives would be carried out. (p. 1)

Wirt and Kirst (2009) precluded Kowalski’s (2010) thought when they contended that superintendents “are expected to lead by relying on professional knowledge to make school-improvement recommendations, and are expected to do so while remaining subservient to the will of the people.” New roles and responsibilities of superintendent were defined through the establishment of professional standards, the discourse of practitioners in the field, and through research conducted on the superintendency. Unfortunately, the reform of the superintendent position had little or no impact on the reformation of the candidate pool.

As this research claims that there could be varying factors that support the marginalization of African American women superintendents, there will be a discussion of androcentrism, ethnocentrism and intersectionality as they relate to both prior research studies and possibly to the experiences of the participants in this research. Experiences
that may shed light as to whether African American women superintendents are being marginalized. Topics in this chapter include (a) marginalization in the research: gender, races, and their interconnectedness; (b) tempered radicals and the marginalization of otherness; (c) synthesis of the information: theoretical framework; (d) androcentrism; (e) women superintendents: The gender leader; (f) ethnocentrism; (g) African American women superintendents; and (h) intersectionality: The intersection of race and gender. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the double whammy effect.

**Marginalization in the Research: Gender, Race, and Their Interconnectedness**

Marginalization, as defined through this research, is the intentional challenges presented and experienced by African American women superintendents as they serve in the role of school district superintendents. Alston (2000) asked the whereabouts of African American women superintendents as she discussed how their lack of presence in the leadership position was intentionally designed by societal biases. Alston (2005) later surmised that, in agreement with previous research, school boards and search firms tend to shy away from allowing African American women the opportunity to lead school districts (Montenegro, 1993).

Research on the experiences of African American women as school superintendents is limited because their voices were marginalized by the experiences of the dominant class of the educational institution. Montenegro (1993) concluded that part of the problem in finding the documentation on the marginalization of the African American women superintendents was found in the purposeful separation of gender and race as variables in the research. The scarcity of research on either being a woman or
being an African American in the role of superintendent did not allow for sufficient information that would suggest further research.

Much of the research on school district superintendents and their lived experiences, completed through the experiences of the white male perspective, was often used to generalize the experiences associated with the superintendent position (Alston, 2005). Few, if any of the experiences discussed the value of the African American women as a school district leader nor did their perspective provide a need at the time for research into the African American women superintendent experiences.

When Jackson (1999) sought to explain the scarcity of documentation on the history of African American women superintendents, she challenged "the popular misconception that African American women were not as well prepared as others" (p. 152). Jackson believed "that their lives as budding professionals amply demonstrated that they were ready for leadership and had meaningful life experiences as educators" that should be shared (1999, p. 142). Jackson went on to write about Dr. Rosa Smith, who was named by the AASA (1999) the 1997 Superintendent of the Year from the state of Wisconsin. Being so honored, Jackson indicated that the experiences of Dr. Smith justified the need for research to discuss why African American women were being marginalized in the position of superintendent.

Tallerico (1999) also noted that because past superintendent studies relied on “white, male samples, and made no mention of the gender, racial, or ethnic backgrounds of their subjects” (p. 29), the experiences of other races and gender were considered unimportant information. This absence of gender, racial, or ethnic backgrounds did not explore the values of studying the experiences of not only women, but African American
women who, one day, could have a dominant presence as chief administrators in school districts (Alston, 2000).

Murtadha and Watts (2005) supported the research of Alston (2005) when they observed that there was a lack of African American perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of school district leaders in educational leadership research, particularly African American women and expressed, “The omission of the Black leadership narratives limits our ability to develop ways to improve schools and communities for children who live in poverty and children of color who are becoming the majority of the nation’s schools” (p. 591).

Brunner and Grogan (2007) also discussed how further research was needed to identify marginalizing practices because women of color, in general, would come to represent a larger portion of the teaching force than the superintendency position.

**Tempered Radicals and the Marginalization of the Otherness**

Alston (2000) discussed how her research was important in addressing the need for studying the unique nature of the experiences of African American women as superintendents. Alston contended:

This [her dissertation] analysis of the role of Black female school superintendents as servant leaders and tempered radicals contributes to removing another layer of educational research and institutional racism that has clouded the importance of that lived experience to our understanding of what has inadvertently kept the Black female superintendent’s unique form of leadership from being considered as a model for leadership and policy in schools. (p. 678)
Alston (2005) discussed in later research that African American women holding positions like superintendents was considered unique and often found themselves characterized as tempered radicals. Alston shared that her belief has been attributed to the consideration that African American women, specifically in research, have been historically seen as different in relationship to the dominant culture of educational leaders.

As the push for African American women to hold leadership positions emerged, there were many leadership considerations that had to be examined.

Meyerson (2001) discussed, in her research, that society saw African American women as leaders, especially in areas like education, to be a radical idea. Meyerson did not dispute this notion, but she employed understanding to explain that this radicalism was necessary for societal reform. Meyerson explained:

Tempered radicals reflect important aspects of leadership that are absent in the more traditional portraits. It is more local, more diffuse, more opportunistic, and more humble than the activity attributed to the modern-day hero. This version of leadership depends on qualities such as patience, self-knowledge, humility, flexibility, idealism, vigilance, and commitment. They are not lone heroes because they are quick to acknowledge that they cannot do it alone. (p. 171)

Alston, in later research, defined a tempered radical as an individual who can identify with and is committed to a cause, community or ideology of an organization and explained the intentional marginalization by suggesting that most times this commitment is at odds with the dominant culture’s interpretation of the cause (p. 586). It is this example of difference that the dominant culture tends to use to justify perception of the
minority culture as being other people whose presence was not important for the success
growth of a school district (Alston, 2005).

Toni Morrison (2017) discussed the concept that African American women in
leadership positions like education were considered other and went on to discuss how the
discussed the concept of otherness, or the perception that persons of color historically are
considered as other because they do not hold the WASP status:

A citizen of Italy or Russia immigrates to the United States. She keeps much or
some of the language and customs of her home country. But if she wishes to be
American, or to be known as such and to actually belong, she must become a
thing unimaginable in her home country, she must become white. (p. 20)

Morrison (2017) explained that the persons born of Eurocentric descent are
considered American and everyone else is considered other and it is because of their
otherness, the dominant society justifies their actions that marginalize other cultures. She
added, “Human beings invent and reinforce dehumanizing categories of otherness in
order to justify economic exploitation. This self-justification shores up our sense of
security and belonging” (Morrison, 2017).

Morrison (2017) credits this belief by the dominant society to the events that have
occurred in U. S. history that supported the need to marginalize other cultures and their
experiences because, according to her theory on marginalization, to marginalize other
cultures allows the dominant culture to remain in control of society (p. 21). The
experiences of African American women superintendents are no exception, and in order
to maintain control of what constitutes a quality education, students’ access to leaders
they can identify successfully with must be limited to the dominant culture. The intent of this literature review was to provide primary source documentation that suggested that there is intentional marginalization of African American women in school district leadership positions.

**Synthesis of the Information: Theoretical Framework(s)**

African American women has long since been overlooked as a viable force in leadership roles. Often seen as intellectually and emotionally unprepared for the role, much of their marginalization was justified through traditional American values and the intersection of ideologies that created a double-whammy against African American women during their experience as the superintendent. As the researcher wanted to discuss the impact of intersectionality on African American women school superintendents to determine if there is marginalization. The significance of this study was to outline the factors that could possibly contribute to this disparity and in particular, to look at the attitudes and beliefs that characterized the experiences of African American females in this top position (Shakeshaft, 1989; Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004). African American female superintendents manage rural, urban, and suburban school districts, and while their roles are very diverse, little research was found to provide an understanding of factors that impact the small percentages of African American women in executive positions in school districts throughout the nation.

**Intersectionality: The Intersection of Race and Gender**

Ladson-Billings (2003) suggested that there was a need among early researchers to deconstruct dominant perspectives rooted in White superiority. This action would
allow for the removal of the dominant paradigm that excludes the opportunity for African American women to become leaders, especially in education.

For the purpose of this research, intersectionality includes the interconnection of race and gender as it relates to the professional experiences of the African American women superintendents. Although the research does not intend to exclude classism, it does not require the connection between class and other variables when discussing professional experiences. According to Murrell and James (2001), “A push and pull exist between issues of race, ethnicity, and gender that affect uniquely career outcomes.” They [Murrell and James] explained that classism is not a factor in leadership roles as those positions tend to suggest a level of class that cannot be denied. Carol Shakeshaft (1989) found that often men and women as well not only are perceived relative to their gender, but they also interact with each other, based upon existing racial biases. Dei (1996) also shared, “One cannot understand the full effects of race without a comprehension of the intersections of all forms of social oppression, including how race is mediated with other forms of social difference” (p. 248). Dei furthered that all forms of social oppression (gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability, etc.) intersect in some manner to provide a clear understanding to the general contextualization of oppression (p. 248). This would suggest a strong connection between race and other axis of oppression that create marginalizational practices.

Collins (2004) asserted that the inequality of African American women is not necessarily rooted in a distinction between white women and African American women, but merely based upon the historical perspective of white women being considered privileged and black women being dominated. This further extended Crenshaw’s
argument that cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but also they are bound together and influenced by the intersections of society. Moses (1989) stated,

At the intersection of race and gender stand women of color, divided by the lines of bias in this society that currently divide White from non-White and male from female. The worlds these women negotiate demand different and often wrenching allegiances. As a result, women of color face significant obstacles. (p. 1)

Moses (1989) furthered,

Black women not only experience the effects of racism but also of sexism, racism, and sexism may be so fused in a given situation, that it may be difficult to tell which is which. (p. 15)

Alston (2005) also revisited the concept of how race and gender influences the marginalizing practices that have kept African American women out of superintendent positions when she discussed how contemporary racism still has strong influence in the attainment of the position. Alston (2005) contended,

The marginalization of the African American woman as a superintendent is emasculated by the fact that those who attain the superintendency often find themselves in positions that are in environment that exist within ‘power differentials.’ This means that the school district leader is battling against political, social and economic constructs of which they are powerless to defeat. Generational poverty characterizes the population and the districts are marred in negative variables that require power, be it political, social or economic. (p. 2012)

Alston’s (2005) initial prediction that African American women superintendents serve against challenging environments within the districts was recognized when research
uncovered marginalization by proof of the lack of African American women superintendents serving the leadership role. Alston believed African American women would find themselves experiencing challenges that would test their capacity to fulfill the position. These statements provide support for research that suggests that race and gender mutually are non-exclusive in impacting the success of the African American female.

African Americans women were always conscious of the need to be very strategic in their decisions and actions. Collins (2000) alluded to intersectionality as she discussed the common experiences that predispose African American women to acquiescing to the will of the consensus as they seek to overcome their challenges. This had to be done without suggesting the challenges were based upon race or gender, despite clearly resulting from the intersection of the two variables. Every decision, according to Collins, is made with the contention that “African American women could not identify with their race or gender as a point of reference” (p. 25).

**Women Superintendents: The Gender Leader**

In 1970, Kate Millett (2000) wrote in her first edition of *Sexual Politics*, “Our society, like all other historical civilization, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls, in short, that every avenue of power within society is entirely in male hands” (p. 34-35). The gender distinction between the school district leader and the population of which this leader serves, has raised a question about the distinction that matters because the supervision of children can involve role definitions. As society attempts to continue to construct a view of traditional male/female roles, the role of a superintendent is still primarily seen as a male-dominated position.
Blount (1998) in his work described Ella Flagg Young, the first woman superintendent of Chicago in 1909, who suggested that women were destined to rule the schools of every city. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) defined androcentrism as,

Not simply the idea that men are superior to women, but that the definition of the male experience is seen as the standard for human and the female experience as the deviation from the norm. In this way, male superiority is rationalized, normalized, disseminated, and reinforced through every social institution. (p. 63)

Distinguished lawyer Catharine MacKinnon (1787) once posited that “virtually every quality that distinguishes men from women is affirmatively compensated in this society” (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 36). This belief that the men are superior has supported the notion men will serve better in leadership roles as well.

Bem (1993) discussed how women are not only confined to subordinate roles in an androcentric society, but are other-ized and marginalized. Bem (1993) stated:

We act as if gender applied only to women because that which is male is taken to be the norm, the standard to which all humans are held, and anything that deviates from the norm must belong to the gendered or other category. (p. 3)

Greenbaum (1999) supported Bem’s (1993) research as she concluded that gender polarization remains alive and well. Greenbaum (1999) furthered this conclusion when she explored Bem’s definition of gender polarization to emphasize the male-female difference is superimposed on so many aspects of the social world that a cultural connection is thereby forged between sex and virtually every other aspect of human experience.
This process of discriminating against women is considered acceptable because of societal gender roles imposed and self-imposed behaviors by which females view themselves (Shakeshaft, Nowell, & Perry, 1991); Sharp et al., 2004; Williams, 2005). Scholars argue that if society, in general, is going to repair the historical trend of women’s misrepresentation, it will be necessary to construct knowledge that accurately represents the authentic expressions of women’s lives (Brooks, 2007). This reconstruction requires researchers to place women at the center of the research process, building knowledge from women’s actual or concrete, life experiences.

Walker (1983) added to the research that there should be a womanist view that gives concrete history to women of color and their contributions to American society. Walker suggested that by the term womanish, she believed that despite the conventions long limiting white women, women of color wanted to know more and in greater depth than what was considered good for them because “they were responsible, in charge, and serious” (p. 10).

Eagly (2007) explained that gender role expectations spill over onto leadership roles and produce important consequences. As result, many women find themselves marginalized when it came to leadership roles.

Estler (1975) attempted to justify some causes for the lack of representation of women in these leadership positions in an introduction of three models that encourage gender stratification. The Women's Place Model, “assumes women's non-participation in administrative careers as based solely on social norms” (Estler, 1975, p. 364). The Discrimination Model, “draws on the assumption that institutional patterns are a result of the efforts of one group to exclude the participation of another” (Estler, p. 369). The
Meritocracy Model, “assumes that the most competent people have been promoted, and thus, women are not competent” (Estler, p. 382). Each of these models draw from the context that women should not hold positions of power. In fact, African American women who became teachers and leaders were seen as activists, the moral conscience within the community, and role models for black children (Collins, 2000).

Björk et al. (1999) described the school superintendent position as a complex political position that distinctly is gender-stratified. In fact, when Skrla and Hoyle (1999) indicated that men are more likely than women to advance from teaching to top leadership positions in a school district, they understood the context by which gender was a primary factor in the decision-making process. Rusch and Marshall (2006) discussed schemas that suggested that school district leadership position was not a gender-neutral position, meaning that the role of superintendent inherently suggested favoritism of one gender over the other. This stagnates the desire for men and women to challenge the status quo of the male dominated position (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008).

Shakeshaft (1989) suggested that this androcentric bias has been common in society because: (a) literature discussing the issue was not identified; and (b) some of the prominent theories held in high regard are studied through the male perspective. In specific, Getzel and Guba’s (1957) Social Systems Theory was incomplete “because women were not included in the study” (p. 153). Additionally, according to Shakeshaft (1989), Hemphill & Coon’s (1957) Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire only observed male leadership roles (p. 3). Bensimon (1989) discussed leadership theories and found that the theories do not account for the idea that “women experience the social
world differently than men do and that translates into a particular epistemology and a different experience of leadership” (Bensimon, 1989, p. 146).

Brunner and Grogan (2007) noted that the “superintendency is one of the most heavily white and masculinized roles in our culture” (p. 12). What matters is the impact that the androcentric view has had on the misrepresentation of women in top leadership positions. This researcher sought to find out if gender bias, based upon the androcentric view of society continued to marginalize women in leadership.

In a Women’s Right conference in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, Sojourner Truth declared "Ain't I a Woman?" and challenged the imagery used by male critics to justify the disenfranchisement of women (Giddings, 1984, p. 66). Then many white women urged that Truth be silenced, fearing that she would divert attention from women's suffrage to African American emancipation. This led to the ethnocentric view that further marginalized African American women. Crenshaw (1989) also found Sojourner Truth’s actions were necessary as she contended,

[The value of] Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when white women speak for and as women. (p. 154)

Crenshaw suggests that if African American women were to have the liberation that their white counterparts sought, their issues would have to be acknowledged as well. This course of action illustrated that race would also come to serve as a prevailing factor in the marginalization of the African American woman.
Walker (1983) suggested that the perspective of being a woman, an African American woman, showed the opposite experiences of white women and African American women in the history of American racism. Walker precluded Crenshaw in her belief that in order to address the concerns of African American women, their voices had to be separate and inclusive of the experiences of the African American woman because the joint support for liberation would sidestep an important issue (p. 12). Later, in separate research VanDeBurg (1992) added,

[We] cannot fully embrace a black perspective because blacks and whites do not function as equals while inhabiting the same territory or participating in the same social institutions. (p. 10)

In 1992, Nobel laureate Toni Morrison prophesized, Racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy and has assumed a metaphorical life embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before. (p. 63)

Morrison (2017) found that social inequality was engrained in the fabric of American society. Omi and Winant (2015) explained in their work, “Race and racism in the United States have been shaped by a centuries-long conflict between white domination and resistance by people of color” (p. 3). Additionally, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) once said that racism is strong because “inequalities are a logical and predictable result of the racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized” (p. 48). These researchers found that race does matter, and when discussing the role of racism in educational leadership, Omi and
Winant (2015) and Ladson-Billings et al. (1995) found a similar perspective by which race and racism formalized into the structures and practices of educating students, in particular, urban students. Ladson-Billings (1995) argued the cause of “African American poverty in conjunction with their schools and schooling is a result of institutional and structural racism” (p. 55). In Carter G. Woodson’s (2016) work, there is a discussion of how race is a central construct that,

Stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to nothing and will never measure up to the standards of other people.

(p. 149)

Considering whether or not these beliefs have merit is a challenge. This is a challenge for African Americans as they complete higher education. It is also a challenge as African Americans aspire to top leadership positions. Especially among African American women who aspire for executive positions in school districts, the challenge becomes increasingly paramount.

**Border Crossing: Overcoming the Oppression of Intersectionality?**

Lopez, Gonzalez, and Fierro (2006) once used the phrase “border crossing” to describe African American women who had to develop the gift of stepping outside of what they were most comfortable with as educators to help all students succeed. Boykins (1986) suggested that despite being African American and a woman, they would have to know their place and acquiesce into mainstream expectations of their leadership roles if they expected to be a success. Katz (2012) explored border crossing when her research explored the experience of an African American woman superintendent whose struggle
was illustrated through her well-developed decisions, while leading a school district. Delia, according to the pseudonym by which Katz (2012) identified her participant, when facing backlash from her decisions, often stressed to parents, “They could advocated for their individual children but that she must advocate for all the children in her district” (p. 11). Delia’s experience as a superintendent was challenging because she ventured into a district with a student population that was very different from that of the school district’s race and culture where she had spent 24 years as a teacher and administrator. As such, “Delia crossed her own border feelings with an understanding that possibly contributed to her own feelings of marginalization” (p. 782). This feeling of marginalization is not uncommon as Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) explained, “Black women must take on, along with all of their obvious job-related duties, the additional task of shifting” (p. 151) when it comes to the role responsibilities. Additionally, Jones and Shorter-Gooden added, “With their White peers, they must shift to shatter the stereotypes of the lazy welfare mother who would rather not work at all, and the unqualified ‘token’ who only has her job because of affirmative action” (p. 151).

**The Double Whammy Effect**

As a collective body of research, Essed (1991) explained that impact of being Black and female is gendered racism which proposes a double whammy effect that stagnates African American women in their quest for top positions. Andrews et al. (1995) indicated, “The phenomena of race and gender concerns for African American women [are] the ‘double whammy effect’” (p. 39). Much of the marginalization was justified through traditional American values and the intersection of the two ideologies of race and gender that created a double-whammy effect against African American women.
Shorter-Gooden (2004) indicated that African American women superintendents find themselves struggling as they make decisions that impact those whom they serve (p. 410). Furthermore, as an African American woman, the struggle of the double whammy effect becomes emasculated when the reality of maintaining leadership positions was impacted by the African American woman’s own personal gender and racial identity issues. Dailey (2015) shared her experience in understanding the impact of this double whammy when she indicated, “I am struggling to keep my superintendent hat on at the same time I live in my African-American skin” (p. 12).

Dailey (2015) furthered by sharing an experience while she led a prominent district that was struggling with racial epithets being put on display at one of the schools that she led. Dailey stated,

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

Dailey (2015) expressed how she felt as though she shifted her beliefs about being an African American woman to accept her role as a superintendent tasked with the role of protecting the interests of her students and their right to quality education that includes their freedom of voice and expression. But she [Dailey] knew that allowing the epithets to remain, despite her frustrations, was a clear indication that she was “struggling to keep my superintendent hat on” (p. 12).
African American Women Superintendents

The limited research on the African American as a school district leader made the claim for the underrepresentation of African American women in superintendent roles worthy of inquiry. The NABSE (1999) suggested that the first modern day African American superintendents were appointed in 1956. NABSE also indicated that there were four African Americans identified during the late 50s and early 60s as trailblazers for African American superintendents to emulate. These trailblazers were Lillard Ashley of Boley, Oklahoma, in 1956; Lorenzo R. Smith of Hopkins Park, Illinois, in 1956; E. W. Warrior of Taft, Oklahoma, in 1958; and Arthur Shropshire of Kinloch, Missouri, in 1963. Even as female superintendents began to increase in hiring, it was not until 1944 when there is documented evidence that an African American woman, Velma Ashley, served as superintendent of the all-black community of Boley, Oklahoma (Revere, 1985).

Restine (1993) explained, “Stereotyping and bias about women's backgrounds, experiences, and interests have produced unfavorable attitudes about diverse women's ability to function in certain situations and in particular positions” (p. 18).

In terms of their limited existence, Moody (1971) commented that there were three factors associated with having school districts led by African American superintendents. First, the school district had a majority African American school board. Second, a majority non-white student population existed. Third, a majority, non-white community population existed. This factor was evident because, in 1974 when Leonard Valverde introduced his theory of Socialization Succession, it was suggested that African Americans are systematically excluded from promotions to top-level positions because they do not conform to the behavioral expectations of the dominant, white male leader.
Furthermore, this socialization, according to Marshall (1993) allowed for this white-male population to serve as gatekeepers to top administrative positions, essentially closing the gate to African American women. Scott (1980) presented the results of a study in which he predicted that the increase in African American women superintendents would only occur as a result of urban decay and that the challenges set to be faced by the African American women would not be a factor in the appointments. Montenegro (1993) determined that Scott’s prediction was validated when there was a sudden influx of African American superintendents found in cities like Detroit, Washington, DC, Atlanta, Houston, Oakland, and other large areas. At this time, Moody (1983) discussed that this lack of presence could not reflect the true efforts made by African Americans to serve in this top position.

**Summary**

*It’s a man’s world.* From inception, the Office of the School Superintendent or the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a school system is the highest position in a school district (Blount, 1998). The role of the superintendent is to provide educational assistance to the school board by supervising the achievement of the district goals, maintaining fiscal operations, and tracking the progress of students. Many believed that the political management responsibilities held by the superintendent in their role are a masculine attribute, placing scrutiny on a female’s ability to perform in this position (Blount, 1998).

*“But ain’t I a woman?”* There is an assumption that African American women superintendents, as a whole, are unable to keep up with sound, credible educational practices as their White women counterparts that are integral to leading school systems. African American women specifically, when the race factor is intersected with their gender factor, are underrepresented in the superintendent positions found across the
United States. They occupy a unique position from which to view the culture from which they are marginalized because these marginalized groups of people have less interest in preserving the status quo. Brunner and Grogan (2007) called for more research to “build deeper and more complex knowledge on what it means to be a woman of color as an educational leader” (p. 130). Trying to use race and gender as variables to justify the marginalization of African American women may seem discriminatory in nature but this researcher intends to counteract such criticism by raising questions that suggests further research into the marginalization of African American women superintendents will be necessary.

**Stereotyping: “Who you calling a b&*ch!”** The stereotypes associated with being the angry black woman spurned the moniker because of people’s perception that African American women in the leadership role govern their actions through personal anger, despite her success, which ultimately leads to her demise. Catherine Gewertz (2006) discussed the perception of African American women superintendents to be angry in their professional actions when she shared Robert S. Peterkin’s, director of the Urban Superintendent Training Program at Harvard University, thoughts on African American women superintendents and their experiences on the job. Peterkin referred to how he once witnessed a reporter asking a superintendent if she agreed with critics who thought of her as a bitch. Quoted in Gewertz’s article, Peterkin stated, “People have a hard time with strong African American women. It starts in the stereotypes we have about women in leadership” (p. 1). It is in those stereotypes, Gerwetz believes, that African American women face significant challenges during their tenure as superintendent. It is the double standard that women who are strong leaders lack something within their personal lives. It
is the belief that the anger towards that situation manifests through their professional experiences as opposed to men who are considered to be visionaries when they take a strong approach in their leadership actions. This double standard provides credibility to the overarching premise that there is intentional marginalization of African American women in the top executive positions simply because of stereotypes related to race and the role of leadership.

**Intentional marginalization: Puppets or scapegoats.** School superintendents directly are accountable to school boards and politicians at both the state and local levels; therefore, the relationship of superintendents with these officials often defined their decisions made in situations within the school district. Moreover, as neither school board members nor politicians trust African American women superintendents to lead the school districts, these superintendents rarely enjoy any degree of support from political officials and often experience very little autonomy while working with state and local politicians (Hunter & Donahoo, 2005, p. 422).

When African American women became superintendents in increasing numbers, much of the research began to explore whether African American women were seen as the messiahs, scapegoats, and the sacrificial lamb to justify their marginalization. This exploration suggested that the increase was intentional in design to discourage systems from hiring the women who had been set up to fail. Hunter and Donahoo (2005) concluded in their research that African American women superintendents experience two intentional behaviors: The Puppet effect and the Scapegoat effect. Hunter and Donahoo (2005) indicated that the puppet effect was used by school boards when they decided, “Rather than treat them as educational experts with the requisite knowledge and
skills needed to improve district conditions, some school boards overrode decisions on educational matters that are within the zone of authority of the superintendent” (p. 424). As a result of the micromanagement technique, the African American women superintendents become the puppet for the board members agenda. Björk and Rodgers (1999) suggested that school board members who recruited minority superintendents often “set unrealistic goals and expected them to have immaculate perception and find miraculous solutions to intractable problems” (p. 6). Within this technique, the failure of the African American women superintendents had the scapegoat effect of blaming the leader for conditions beyond their control. More than 10 years earlier, Revere (1985) concluded that African American women were “recruited for the left over districts and for failure” (pp. 160–161) and were “expected to become miracle workers and turn despair into joy” (p. 160). Hunter et al. (2005) furthered, “As mayoral control increase in school systems, the likelihood is that the school superintendent becomes a scapegoat” (p. 424). Bush (2000) and Celestin (2003) pointed to the following external challenges that underlie the scapegoating practices: exclusion from the good old boys’ network and other informal networks, societal attitudes that African American women lack competency in leadership positions, the double bind/double jeopardy of race and gender, lack of awareness of political maneuvers, gender stereotypes, professional socialization, and professional positioning.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional and personal experiences of African American Women superintendents during their tenure as school district leader and to document the commonalities found in their experiences that illuminate the idea of the marginalization, if any, of African American women superintendents. As indicated in Chapter 1, many African American women superintendents, in general, find themselves struggling as leaders for varying reasons. For example, it was cited that African American superintendents rarely receive a degree of political support that allows them to govern effectively the practices of districts, especially large urban districts (Donahoo & Hunter, 2005). This information suggested that African American women superintendents are thrust into positions and often find themselves without the right connections to best approach to leading the school districts.

Prior to this research on African American women superintendents from the perspective of both race and gender, much of the research either focused on gender or race issues. Brunner (2003) discussed that the lack of research studies on both variables simultaneously could have been paramount in determining if there was marginalization of African American women in the role of the superintendent.

African American women represent less than 1% of the highest leadership level, the school superintendent (NABSE, 2017). Björk (2000) indicated that the position of a superintendent is a highly male-dominated executive position in the United States. Wrushen and Sherman (2008) suggested that dialogue [to] raise the consciousness of gender issues should be analyzed. The implications of all the research raised additional concerns about the ability of women, specifically African American women, in the
position of the superintendency to have on-challenging experiences. This chapter includes a discussion of the research methodology and procedures used during the study; topics include the research design, population sample/participants, instrumentation/validation, data collection, and analysis.

**Research Questions**

Although African Americans, as a whole, experience career challenges in the educational arena, many disparaging experiences are found during the tenure of African American women superintendents.

Examining the experiences of African American women could assist in understanding why a small percentage of women hold the position of superintendent (Grogan & Brunner, 2007). These findings encouraged this researcher to analyze the experiences of African American women superintendents and determine if there were common experiences that characterized the challenges endured and if the commonalities in the experiences could be attributed to certain variables like race and gender. As African American women discussed their experiences in previous studies, much of the literature review showed that many of these women were marginalized for their lack of understanding of their place in society (Alston, 2000; Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013; Björk & Rogers, 1999). As such, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How do African American women who have attained the superintendency in school districts describe their professional experiences?
2. To what extent do African American women superintendents attribute their experiences to race and gender?
Additional research supported the premise that, although race and gender cannot, independently, support a marginalization theory, there is evidence that the intersection of the two variables can explain the implications of the phenomena (Crenshaw, 1989). Despite having strong education credentials, African American women are not regarded as highly qualified superintendents (Brown, 2011). Brown suggested that this was due to race and gender combined as a form of oppression.

**Research Design**

It was important to understand that in qualitative research, the goal of the researcher is to build a contextual understanding of human behavior in relationship to their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Experiential learning has been defined as the direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter. In other words, experience comes first, and learning is the byproduct of the direct experience (Brailas, A., Avani, S., Gkini, C., Deilogkou, M., Koskinas, K., & Alexias, G., 2017).

The research design for this study was a narrative inquiry, with the intent of sharing the experiences of the African American women superintendents. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) discussed in the social phenomenology how the view of narrative inquiry is explained by the premise that people living in a world of daily routines in life are able to ascribe meaning to the routines. The use of the narrative inquiry approach allowed each of the participant an opportunity to share their perspective on marginalization and if there was evidence of such during the tenure of superintendent. Connelly et. al included that studying through qualitative research methods like narrative inquiry provides the highest degree of clarity on research by providing meaning to a
research question through human actions and experiences related to the question. The results of qualitative research are intended to provide the researcher a contextual understanding of the experiences of African American women superintendents that could inspire future research on strategies to de-marginalize discriminatory practices. Social justice reform in education must include these strategies. The researcher documented the experiences of African American women superintendents during their tenure as school district leaders. The collection of descriptive data provided a context for elaboration based upon the participants’ point of view.

**Sample Population**

The overall population of participants included African American women school superintendents who were employed in districts across the United States. This consisted of superintendents with at least one year of experience in the position. The researcher excluded newly appointed and interim superintendents not officially appointed to the position. This was intended to ensure participants responded without concern for job stability.

The identified population was secured from the names listed in the NABSE 2017 listing of African American superintendents. The NABSE directory lists all the African Americans across the United States who serve in a superintendent role. The use of snowball sampling helped to determine the sample because the returned responses could increase during the course of data collection. As the list is consistently updated, the process of snowball sampling also supported the acquisition of the names of additional African American women superintendents not identified in the NABSE Directory.
An invitation package was emailed to African American women superintendents. The packet included an introductory letter, an informed consent form, a form requesting permission to audio-record the interview, a leadership self-assessment survey, and a copy of the Skype/FaceTime interview questions.

The Informed Consent form described in detail, the purpose of the research, the expectations of the participants, the timeline for data collection and the incentives or benefits of their participation. The form also gave information regarding the researcher’s supervisor and contact for any participatory concerns.

The sample for this study derived from those participants who returned the initial invitation package that included the informed consent form, a Self-Assessment Survey and a permission form as potential participants also agreed to take allow the interview to be recorded.

To determine if there would be a diverse sample, participants were asked questions in the invitation package that included district type (rural, urban, and suburban), district size, participant’s age, and years of experience as superintendent.

**Participants**

The participants for this study were African American women who served as superintendents in the United States. As this study was designed to document the lived experiences of the superintendents, each African American woman superintendent participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect her identity and freedom of speech.

The participants were chosen as a result of their returning the invitation package and the agreement to be interviewed via FaceTime and/or Skype. The researcher notified
each participant that there would be no incentive granted to participate; however, there
would be an expectation of intrinsic benefits from providing evidence for this research.

**Instrumentation**

This potential participants consisted of 101 identified African American women
superintendents from 24 states in the United States, compiled from an initial list of
African American superintendents created by the National Alliance of Black School
Educators in 2017. NABSE compiles this list annually and typically publishes a directory
do African American superintendents, regardless of gender. The National Association of
Secondary School Principals provided the template for the Leadership Self-Assessment
that participants completed. The researcher developed an Interview Survey Instrument
with eight open-ended questions derived from the same leadership survey. This survey
served as an opportunity to initiate the narrative conversation that the superintendents.
The researcher included these items with the initial invitation package that would be sent
to the potential participants.

**Leadership Self-Assessment Survey.** The National Association of Secondary
School Principals (2010) survey coordinator provided the Breaking Ranks 21st Century
School Leadership Skills survey template modified, using the typical superintendent’s job
description to allow this researcher to create the leadership self-assessment instrument
(See Appendices A). The Leadership Self-Assessment Likert-scale survey was designed
and utilized to allow the superintendents the opportunity to assess their personal
perception of their ability to hold the superintendent position. Each superintendent self-
rated the Likert scale, ranging from 1-5 for action level in five area domains:
- **Educational Leadership**: This domain self-assesses the ability of the participant to judge her leadership direction, team goal setting and sensitivity of the role.

- **Communication**: This domain self-assesses the ability of the participant to judge her oral communication skills.

- **Organization**: This domain self-assesses the participant’s organization skills.

- **Resolving Complex Problems**: This domain self-assesses the ability of the participant to use appropriate judgement and to be results-oriented.

- **Developing self and others**: This domain self-assesses the ability of the participant to recognize and understand their own strengths and weaknesses as well as to recognize and develop others’ strengths and weaknesses.

Using this Likert-scale template, the self-assessment survey used predetermined themes to question each superintendent as to her own perception of the job performance based upon the superintendent’s leadership and relationship skills. This survey provided opportunity for the superintendent to reflect upon their own perception of their capacity to lead school districts, based upon job expectations. The scale range indicated the lowest performance as 1 (Never) and the highest as 5 (Always). The use of the Likert scale also helped the researcher to determine the subjectivity of the participants’ perception of themselves.

**Interviews.** The Interview Survey Instrument outlined the open-ended questions to which the participants responded. The use of open-ended questions allowed for the participants to elaborate on their experiences, to provide examples of their experiences and to allow for follow-up questions tailored to the initial responses (See Appendices B). It was important to use open-ended questions as they provided the opportunity to retrieve
important facts as well as the general opinions of the participants (Yin, 2003). Each participant also discussed her pathway to their position and shared the impact of her experiences on their personal lives. Each participant revealed their perception of the challenges they experience in their role.

An audio recorder recorded the experiences of the superintendents through their own individual perspective. To document the interview responses, the researcher transcribed verbatim the responses in the recordings of each interview. Successful coding of similar themes illustrated the traits that each superintendent shared in common.

**Validation.** The 2017 NABSE Superintendent Directory, unpublished, was used as a part of the initial compilation of the population identified. Additionally, a cross-referenced check of the unpublished draft list was performed with actual school districts found on online state superintendent directories and associations. To ensure the validity of the listing, there was also a review of the other 26 online state associations or directories to determine if there were any unknown African American women superintendents serving in school districts. Initially, there was an actual finding of 106 African American Women superintendents, and when interim and first-year candidates were excluded, the population resulted in the potential for 101 participants. Sending email invitation packages to all of the candidates helped to determine if there would be any unknown potential candidates. The snowball sampling procedure was used so that, through superintendent collaboration, any unknown potential candidates could be identified.
Data Collection

On February 12, 2018, the researcher distributed 101 superintendent invitation packages via email to all African American women superintendents and their executive assistants. The researcher asked potential participants if they were interested in participating in the research study. The researcher described the purpose of the research in detail and offered an opportunity for participation.

The invitation to participate occurred in two phases, including the initial recruitment via telephone and email, with a deadline to accept participation of February 28, 2018. Interviews were scheduled shortly thereafter. A second round of invitations occurred on March 2nd, with a deadline for return on March 10, 2018, and a second opportunity to interview by March 23, 2018. This follow-up ensured that initial email requests and telephone messages were received. The follow-up was also designed to gauge the interest of non-responding superintendents to participate.

Of the invitations sent, 23 potential participants responded either yea or nay to participating, with an overall response rate of the candidate pool being 23%. Of those responding, 12 participants responded in the affirmative to participate, achieving a response rate of 60%. At the end of the data collection period, 11 superintendents completed the data collection process.

Data collection occurred in two parts: completion of the Leadership Self-Assessment Survey, designed to express the perceptions of the superintendents’ performance and relationships, and a 45-minute Skype or Facetime video interview used to allow the superintendents to provide oral examples of their experiences. The Leadership Assessment Survey took the participant approximately 10 to 20 minutes to
complete. The survey determined the participants’ perception of their capacity to be superintendent. The average interview time was 65-70 minutes, with a range of at least 50 minutes and at maximum 80 minutes. Written transcripts were created to document the interview. The first interview phase began during week three in late February and ended mid-March (approximately 3/19/17). The second phase began approximately March 23, 2017 and lasted until April 11th.

Through completion of the subsequent FaceTime/Skype interview, the participants provided examples of their views about their experience as a school superintendent. The semi-structured interview process included an effort to acquire responses that provided empirical evidence that addresses the research question.

Participants were informed that a pseudonym would be used in order to protect their identity. As the research was not designed to have an adverse effect on the job stability of the superintendent, the researcher used the data shared to find common trends among the participants’ experiences and would be used to develop a narrative that could explain the challenges the participants faced. As the interview questions were provided to the participants in the invitation package, participants indicated that they wrote responses to the interview questions in advance. The participants were also allowed to review direct quotes for accuracy.

**Data Analysis**

The findings during the data analysis were a three-fold presentation. First, a presentation of the findings of the self-assessment survey. Participants’ ratings were reported to reflect the percentage of time each superintendent believes she was successful in implementing the action described in the leadership domains. Tables were included to
illustrate overall results as well as to present the data in terms of each superintendent. Secondly, narratives of the superintendents’ perspective of their experiences provided for the identification of preliminary themes. The narratives provided descriptive data in response to the research questions asked in Chapter one. As the qualitative data is analyzed, the intent is to find patterns or commonalities that validate the participants’ experiences, and therefore, become the research results (Davis, 2004). The intent of this data analysis was to find commonalities and trends that explained the challenges and issues African American women superintendents faced during their experiences.

Lastly, findings aligned with the leadership self-assessment that was extracted from the NASSP leadership styles survey (educational leadership, communication, organization, resolving complex problems and developing self and others) provided support for the identified themes. Coding methods helped to gather thematic information about the perceptions of African American women superintendents (i.e., how they feel about themselves and how they are perceived by others). Researchers explained that thematic analysis is a pursuit of themes that emerge as being central to the explanation of the experiences or observable facts (Daly, Kellchear, & Gliksman, 1997).

Thematic analysis was used to record and categorize the responses the superintendents gave during the interview process that align to the themes derived from the leadership survey domains. Similar methodological approaches were used in previous research of this nature (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2003). Recorded responses were coded for themes in this research that indicated the similar character traits that the respondents shared as they described their experiences in the role of the superintendent. This became important when discussing if the African American
women superintendents agreed that their experiences illustrated equality in their presence as a district leader or if they agreed that they were being marginalized because of the intersection of their social identities like race and gender.

As a part of the analysis, demographic information had to be extracted from the data. This information included: (a) education and leadership practices, (b) career aspirations/career trajectory, (c) district demographics, (d) stakeholder support and (e) human capital concerns and was used to simply identify the conditions under which the superintendents served. Initial coding themes acquired from the interviews included : (a) perceptions (images) of the African American women, (b) the whole child concept (the perception of society’s definition of what it means to educate the academic, social and emotional well-being of students), (c) family influences, and (d) overall job satisfaction. These codes were categorized into a second round to combine responses that generated themes to identify the role of women in traditional society (as defined by Charlotte Gilman’s *Man-Made World*), the social and political behavior of women and the role of a superintendent.

Round three coding included a validation of the transcripts with the participants to ensure that the information was accurate. This information supported the efforts to answer the research questions as they applied to the theoretical framework. As such, the thematic analysis of the data collected provided that the responses of the participants were a direct illustration of their experiences as school district leader. Patton and Patton (2002) indicated that the participants’ reflections, conveyed in their own words, strengthen the face trustworthiness of the research. This justified the use of thematic
analysis in this research as it allowed the data collected to become the primary source of information from the perspective of each superintendent.

Qualitative researchers find that their research does not represent a single, fixed, or universal concept, but “rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of research methodologies and projects” (Winter, 2000, p.1). In other words, the research is grounded in the information provided by the sample population and their perceived acceptance and understanding of their beliefs. Consequently, the validity of the research relies upon the trustworthiness of the data collected (Mishler, 2000).

A discussion of the findings and a conclusion presented in Chapter 5 were used to bring closure to the research in terms of illustrating if African American womensuperintendents are being marginalized because of a combination or intersection of variables. Chapter Five also presents the research to determine if the study presented implications for further research.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to document the experiences of African American women superintendents as they serve in their roles and analyze if there are trends that can support or refute the claim that African American women superintendents who have challenging tenures as school district leaders have experiences generated by intersectionality. This qualitative research used the narrative analysis approach to present the research. The researcher used snowball sampling and collected two types of data, a self-assessment survey and a personal interview, to collect descriptive data.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This chapter includes the results of the study and includes shared experiences of 11 African American women superintendents who participated in the study. As the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of African American women superintendents and to explore, if any, the challenges in their experiences and how those challenges impacted their leadership, it was important to document the commonalities found in their experiences that illuminate the idea of the marginalization of African American women superintendents. Through the Leadership Self-Assessment survey, the researcher asked the participants to give their perception of their own leadership abilities. Participants’ perceptions included data relative to their education, leadership preparation, and career trajectory. The participants also included the demographics of their school districts, their relationship with the board of education, their district community stakeholders’ influence on school operations, and the impact of their roles and responsibilities on family relationships. Finally, the participants were asked to share experiences that detailed their personal perceptions, which explain the challenges African American women superintendents experience, in general.

Research Question(s)

This research study was designed to find out what the shared experiences of African American women superintendents were as it related to two research questions:

Research Question 1: How do African American women superintendents who have attained the superintendency in school districts describe their professional experience? This question sought to share the experiences of these women as it relates to their performance and the relationships with their stakeholders.
**Research Question 2:** To what extent do African American women superintendents attribute their experience to race and gender? This question narrows to focus of their experiences, according to their perceptions, to determine if their experiences are a result of marginalization through any of the social variables discussed in Chapter 1 and 2.

**Participants**

Participants included 11 African American women superintendents who met the criteria to participate in this study. The criteria included rules that the potential participants had to have served as superintendents in the U. S. for at least one year and their job status was not identified as interim. The late response of the two additional potential participants helped to illustrate the impact of using the snowball sampling approach as they were not initially listed in the original candidate pool. The two African American women superintendents were located by the referral of other participants. Unfortunately the two did not participate in the study. Ten other eligible candidates; however, responded that they declined to participate.

Listed below is demographic information of the eleven African American women superintendents who participated in this study. The demographic information included their education, their career aspirations and their career trajectory to the district leadership role.

**Participant 1: Contrary Jones.** Contrary Jones began her career against the backdrop of a community that saw her role as superintendent to be a triple threat, an Afro-Latino woman, leading a large school district. Leading a Big 12 School District, Contrary provided the leadership for her district with the philosophy of being a servant
leader wherein she was competent, caring, and had humanitarian spirit for people. But so as to not anger her constituents, Contrary Jones contended that she did things to make people feel comfortable, sometimes in contrast to what was right. This led to her 90% approval rating, yet, at times hid her strength of conviction in making decisions.

Participant 2: Dr. Perfect Jones. The opportunity to lead a district in the Southern United States required the superintendent Perfect Jones to use her charm to gain credibility in her role of superintendent. Although Dr. Perfect was a hard worker in her district, often without support from her stakeholders, many of whom thought she was not fit for the job, she often found herself suffering from the attitudes of those district constituents who look to her to lead the district amid blatant disrespect. Dr. Perfect intended to retire from her district and intends to depart to spend time with her grandchildren. To her, the need to be with her family, will rescue her from the ‘imperfect’ job.

Participant 3: Dr. Willing Jones. Superintendent Willing Jones was an educator by birth, having grown up among a family of educators and betrothed to another educator. As such, she was willing to join the ranks of the ‘family businesses.

At first, Dr. Willing was seen as a little naive and insecure as a teacher, but she was somewhat more opinionated in her quest to be a superintendent because she believed that she was more experienced. Dr. Willing Jones’ lack of traditional superintendent training resulted in her going through the inner struggle of finding her way in the school leadership position. Dr. Willing held eight prior positions on her career trajectory and found many of her male counterparts were moving along the pathway much more quickly than she was moving.
Participant 4: Dr. Risk Jones. Dr. Risk Jones was the youngest and most unique superintendent, in terms of her pathways and experiences. As the superintendent of a comprehensive on-line district, Dr. Risk had the challenge of overcoming her upbringing that placed her as the minority in all of her educational experiences. As she was raised in a small White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), community in Georgia, she was persistent in getting her education and rising to the excellence that helped her gain her superintendency. Dr. Risk indicated that her success was an embodiment of the premise which she held, to never give up on her dreams and to always take chances. Dr. Risk did not have a brick and mortar setting to lead and was fascinated by the online world. Dr. Risk grew tired of the school buildings that housed dangerous situations and environments and risked her success on the newness of online educational programs. And although Dr. Risk worked in a unique situation, online institutions did not remove the issues of race and gender.

Participant 5: Dr. Justice Jones. Dr. Justice Jones began her provincial educational career by longing for adventure. When Corporate America made her feel imprisoned by a hideous beast of mediocrity, Dr. Justice sacrificed her high corporate pay for an educational experience that paid less. At first, she was frightened by the teaching position and unsure if she was the right person to continue in education. Dr. Justice soon learned to appreciate her skills when she acquired her first principalship in the Southeast United States. While Dr. Justice’s love for education gradually resulted in her adapting a friendlier and more civil manner than she had earlier on, she eventually managed to become a collaborative leader who loved her new adventure and worked tirelessly to
transform the district into cooperative initiatives focused on meeting the goals set for the school district.

**Participant 6: Dr. Determined Jones.** Dr. Determined Jones was a fierce, bold, and confident superintendent, who rarely allowed anyone to tell her how to live her life. Dr. Determined strove for independence, because she was tired of the restrictions laid before her by her career trajectory. She fell in love with education and spent many years going up the corporate ladder to reach her position as superintendent. Dr. Determined recognized that the position was a 24 hour, seven-day position that did not allow for her actions to be inappropriate in any manner. She later found out that this expectation was pre-determined by her race and gender as she progressed through an interesting trajectory leading to the position.

**Participant 7: Dr. Competent Jones.** Dr. Competent Jones began her career as school support and was not intending to be a school administrator. She aspired to post-secondary educational positions. Having multiple opportunities that kept her away from the college setting, Dr. Competent explored school leadership, district leadership, and then the superintendency. When she finally acquired the position as superintendent, one of the things that illustrated Dr. Competent’s important character traits was her strength and intelligence that made her resolve to be a successful superintendent because she was denied the first opportunity on a technicality.

Dr. Competent was an intelligent educator whose opportunity to become a superintendent came true by the multiplicity of experiences that she had to acquire to ensure that she was credible as an African American woman wanting more than the
normal. She self-proclaimed her future superintendence and had served in three states at the time of her participation in this study.

**Participant 8: Superintendent Militant Jones.** Militant Jones found herself in a unique situation as a school superintendent. An elected position, Superintendent Militant stepped forward to, upon the election, to support school district(s) reform in a rural county ripe for annexation into a neighboring county. Militant intended to stop annexation of her county much like she defended her country in her role as a former military personnel turned educator. Her role as superintendent was broad in the spectrum as she served as a county superintendent, supervising more than 20 district superintendents. Militant Jones was courageous and self-reliant. She also did not fit into the expectations of the other county superintendents, despite her credentials and certification. Many of her colleagues found it challenging to collaborate with Militant Jones because she was outspoken and independent, rather than graceful, silent, and demure.

**Participant 9: Dr. Tenacious Jones.** Dr. Tenacious Jones found herself strong in her role as she was on a mission. Having served for three years as superintendent, Dr. Tenacious’ career trajectory began in education, but she was uncertain at what level she would aspire to as she struggled to find her place in society. Dr. Tenacious Jones wanted success, but she did not know where it would begin. Once having the opportunity to hold a teaching position, Dr. Tenacious had to take an alternate route to leadership as she went to work for the state department of education to support what she called the struggle of educators. Within her experiences, she encountered many naysayers who did not believe
she would achieve the success that she ultimately acquired. Dr. Tenacious ultimately became a prominent African American woman superintendent in her state.

**Participant 10: Superintendent Dedicated Jones.** Superintendent Dedicated was a faithful worker who was enticed into pursuing education when she did work in the criminal justice system while pursuing a psychology degree. Working with incarcerated youths, Superintendent Dedicated enlisted in a special education program and with the help of emergency certification, began working as a teacher of special education. She later became a special education program director at the central office and later worked as the coordinator of special education.

Superintendent Dedicated is praised for her faithful personality and contemporaneity. Many people in the district described Superintendent Dedicated as one who was always ready to jump into new adventures as she was told to do.

**Participant 11: Dr. Loyal Jones.** Dr. Loyal Jones began her career in the private school sector. Dr. Loyal credited her desire to be an educator to her aunt who was ‘loyal’ in her support of the 37-year veteran. Despite Dr. Loyal’s lack of having experience as a school principal, she is an impetuous leader who wanted to take control of her own destiny. In continuing that loyal sentiment, Dr. Loyal honed her skills as a scientist to become director of science, director of curriculum, assistant superintendent and then as superintendent. Ultimately, she was told that she was one of the most skilled superintendents ever to lead the district. Serving in her third contract, Dr. Loyal was praised for her scientific approach to disaggregating data and she gained the confidence of her community constituents, whose ideas about education were strong and her intelligence ensured their respect for her.
At the conclusion of the analysis of the data collected, it was evident that the primary focus of the role of the superintendent for the participants was to educate students. Each spoke of their initial desire to support successfully the district and the communities they served. The African American women superintendents in this study talked of both the successes and challenges they experienced, despite lack of resources, underfunding, teacher certification, and student achievement often associated with their district leadership (Brown, 2011).

Findings

The findings in this research are intended to refer specifically to the experiences of those participants in the study and were not intended to generalize the role and experience of the African American women superintendents. The Leadership Self-Assessment Survey was designed to give the superintendents the opportunity to judge and provide a perception of their own skillset. The interviews gave an opportunity for the women to share their experiences about the superintendency. The data collected were analyzed and intended to illustrate narrative, empirical interpretations of their experiences. The women shared, among other things, experiences that detailed what they perceived as examples of their marginalization.

Leadership Preparation

The participants indicated that each began as a school level educator. Eight of the participants acquired teacher or superintendent certification through traditional teacher education programs, while the other three obtained licensure through alternative licensure programs like Teach for America. A summary of participant demographic information is outlined in Table 1.
Table 1

Summary Matrix of Participants’ Demographic Characteristics

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>Highest degree attained</th>
<th>Traditional career trajectory</th>
<th>Years in education</th>
<th>Years as superintendent</th>
<th>District type</th>
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</table>

Note. *Traditional Career Trajectory is defined as advancing to through the role of teacher, assistant principal, principal, district leadership, assistant superintendent and superintendent. ** Online districts encompass students from an entire state(s) and identify with the majority of the student population’s home location.

Leadership Self-Assessment Survey. The participants’ understanding of the role of the superintendent served as the primary purpose of the self-assessment survey these African American women superintendents completed. The self-assessment supported the contention the participants held that they felt very confident about their ability to hold the position of superintendent. It became important to explore their self-assessment responses because this instrument set the tone for how the African American women perceived their experiences (See Appendices A). As illustrated in the Leadership Assessment Survey responses, the African American women superintendents showed pride in their career
trajectory as evidenced by their career experiences that offered credence to their preparation for the role of superintendent.

**Interviews.** The interviews of the 11 superintendents yielded findings significant to the reviewed literature. A consensus of their responses indicated they felt being a superintendent was an important job that constantly required each of them to prove themselves worthy of the position. The interview questions asked the superintendents to give examples of varying situations that impacted their tenure as superintendent. Although at times their responses were diverse in nature, there was still a consistency that illustrated commonalities in their overall experiences. The narratives shared by the African American women superintendents illustrated that the belief existed that African American women superintendents were being marginalized for many reasons.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of African American Women superintendents during their tenure as school district leader; and to document the commonalities found in their experiences that illuminate the impact of the intersectionality of race and gender on the African American women superintendents. In the interviews, the participants were asked to share their views regarding their experiences, and the researcher found that there were six prevalent themes that were identified: (a) their capacity to hold the position; (b) how the superintendents responded concerning their stakeholders’ perception of their role as superintendent in contrast to the traditional image of women (in both political and social contexts); (c) the significance of having a balanced family life; (d) receiving and responding to public scrutiny and personal attacks; and (e) the impact of race, gender, and intersectionality on their experiences (as it applied to the image of the African American women people’s reaction
to their presence). Their responses were intended to explore the research questions and to provide detailed information on their experiences.

**Research Question 1**

Research question 1 asked: How do African American women who have attained the superintendency in school districts describe their professional experiences?

**Theme 1: Capacity to hold Superintendent Position.** The participants believed in their ability to hold the superintendent job. All of the superintendents agreed that the job of the superintendent was challenging and required significant leadership experiences. Each shared during the interviews how they perceived that their career trajectory helped them to prepare for the superintendent role. Although varied in their responses, they shared the perception that they were required to serve lengthy time in subservient roles to constantly prove themselves worthy of the superintendency, unlike other racial and gender counterparts who often could bypass certain positions in their quest for the superintendency.

**Interviews.** It was evident through the superintendents’ narratives that their career trajectories provided them with the valuable experience they believed they needed to help prepare them for the superintendent positions (See Appendices B). One superintendent shared how her lengthy experience took her from wondering about her skills to feeling competent about doing the job:

I spent a total 34 years contract somewhere in education. I have spent 27 in the schoolhouse where I taught for 7 years, served as assistant principal for 3 years and as a principal for 17 years. Interestingly, I was a principal for all grade configurations in those years. I worked in central office as regional superintendent, supervising 140 schools for three years, and now I am serving as superintendent in my fourth year. I don’t think six years ago, 10 years ago, etc. I
may have thought I was not equipped for this position, but now I think I am the right person for this job. (Dr. Perfect)

Two superintendents discussed how participation in a superintendent leadership program made them qualified and viable candidates for a superintendent position:

I taught for 4 years in public schools. After teaching, I went to the state department of education where I worked as a specialist and by the time I left, I was the associate state superintendent over academics, specifically curriculum and instruction. I went back to a school district as the assistant superintendent for six years. I completed broad superintendent residency program and I asked to be placed in a larger, more diverse district, so I was placed in a county as a deputy superintendent for four years before returning home as superintendent. (Dr. Tenacious)

I worked in education for 26 years before my superintendency experience. I worked as an English teacher, an elementary school principal, and then became an assistant superintendent over many areas. I was assistant superintendent over magnet schools, gifted and talented programs, pupil personnel services, and then over schools, in general. I became chief academic officer in a public schools. I then became chief academic officer in a school district when I applied to attend the Broad Superintendent’s Academy. My first superintendency came in 2011 and here I am. (Superintendent Contrary)

Other participants believed that their extended experiences would justify the perception that being a superintendent was the next phase in their careers.

I definitely can tell you I have done every level with the exception of being a principal. I began my career in a private school in New York as a physics and math teacher for 8 years. I took a deep dive into a public school classroom for 15 years before becoming an administrator. I worked as an assistant principal with a principal who allowed me to do everything, including scheduling. I skipped the principalship to become chairperson for science. Then I became the director of science in another district. I served as director of curriculum, assistant superintendent and deputy superintendent. I served as superintendent in one school district for 5 years and was recruited to another school district where I have been working for about six years. I think I have over 37 years’ experience as some form of educator. That’s why I am qualified. (Dr. Loyal)
Longevity in the profession described the sentiment of Dr. Loyal as she explains that having numerous years of experiences guided her sense that she was qualified for the position.

I knew I was going to be a math teacher. Later I spent time as the coordinator of professional learning and then as assistant principal at an online academy. After about 20 years, I experienced a change and moved into the superintendency. (Dr. Risk)

I have worked in education for 20 years, and began teaching in a middle school. I served as a middle school assistant principal and a high school assistant principal, executive director of secondary education and assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. Now I am a superintendent of schools. (Dr. Willing)

I spent a total of 34 years in education that began in a local school system. I taught elementary grades for 14 years. I had the credentials to become a principal; but I was shopped around doing feasibility study workshops and took an additional 3 years before I got a principalship. I moved here and became principal, curriculum director, and assistant superintendent. I have been the superintendent for the past 12 years. (Dr. Justice)

Only one superintendent did not use her longevity to explain her progression; instead she discussed her feelings on the natural progression to the position in terms of career trajectory:

I began my educational journey as an elementary teacher. After earning my master’s degree, I applied for my first administrative position. I was an assistant principal and the supervisor for special education. I was appointed principal and then appointed associate superintendent. Now I am the superintendent. (Dr. Determined)

Although the position is considered a part of the natural progression of the pathway, one superintendent found herself being chosen only to assist the district in staving off a state takeover and only temporarily. Once gaining this success, she was still asked to remain temporary for an additional year before becoming permanent:

In fact, I recall being asked to serve as interim superintendent when the district fired my predecessor, and as the most tenured, I led to district through the
challenge of state takeover. After this, it was still another year later that I was appointed to the permanent position. (Superintendent Dedicated)

One superintendent found herself preparing for the superintendency by relying on the societal perception of her capabilities to handle the position as her position was a general voter-elected position.

I’ve been in education for only 15 years; but I had what, at the time, was called ‘added value,’ My career trajectory included being a teacher for 5 years, Career & Technical Education Director and then assistant principal. I held both positions (CTE Director/Asst. Principal) at the same time. As CTE Director, I made connections with the community because I believe CTE programs were the ‘whip cream and cherry’ of education. I found that I had to do dealings with businesses like Northup Grumman, HVAC Corp., and so forth and post-secondary schools. As CTE Director, I grew the career clusters from 7 to 17. I had 17 CTE clusters that forced my presence in the community. After that, I decided to run for county schools superintendent. (Superintendent Militant)

Preparation for the position, unfortunately, does not always ensure the acquisition of the position when there are barriers that can be used to justify the denial of the position. One superintendent found that years of preparation could be hindered by state requirements when those requirements vary according to the state because certification for superintendent is not national certification:

I was denied my first opportunity as a superintendent as the state refused to accept my out-of-state credentials because of one course deficiency. Having a friend on the board afforded me the opportunity to find out that a subsequent candidate (a black man) had the same issue but was given a waiver to give him the chance to complete course. (Dr. Competent)

As a final thought on their ability to hold the position, the superintendents discussed how, in the end they found that their stakeholders had to be convinced that they were able to do the job. They revealed that the perception that they were capable was not always a result of their attainment of the position. It was through their performance that they would gain or lose credibility.
In the end, servant leadership is not just about being the leader and autonomy. Servant leadership is about understanding the needs of the school and community and serving others, especially children. I think I served the children well; I am negotiating a second contract right now. (Dr. Willing)

My biggest challenge was having underperforming students who were transient and we worked to use our best judgement without data to encourage learning. Our methods must have worked. The results of our statewide tests reveal that at all grade levels, most of our students are now performing at a higher level. (Dr. Determined)

My biggest success story was when we took the parents to a community college and a university to show them that we are working to send their children to post-secondary schools. We showed them a dormitory on the campus so that they would know what their children would be exposed to when they left home. Parents indicated that appreciated the fact that we were concerned about their children. That, to me, is bigger than any number or improvement score I can give you. We were a family, and I was the mother sharing my ‘children’s’ potential for success. (Dr. Competent)

Superintendent Militant also added that once the credibility had been acquired, she had to validate the support by encouraging her stakeholders to see the value in her vision and mission,

You motivate the people by validation, purpose, direction and when you do that, your vision becomes their vision. I used that thoughtful expression to encourage increased levels of success for all of my districts. It is my pleasure to report that this county is on the rise. (Superintendent Militant)

**Self-Assessment Survey: Educational Leadership.** The self-assessment survey the participants completed helped to frame their beliefs about their ability to hold a leadership position. The survey instrument asked the participants to rate their ability to hold the position of superintendent in five domains. In the first domain of the survey instrument, the participants critiqued their skillset in educational leadership, with subdomain topic questions on leadership direction, goal setting skills, and sensitivity to the roles and responsibilities of superintendent. Leadership direction, for the
superintendent participants, was defined as the belief that, as superintendent, they could set the vision and the mission for the district strategic goals. The participants indicated that they knew that the superintendent was also responsible for developing strategies for meeting the strategic goals and providing direction for the action research plans that ensured the programs and improvements achieved the goal.

Goal setting skills, for the participants, was defined as the ability of the superintendent to implement strategies that met district goals; to model behavior that ensured group contribution to achieving goals. The participants felt strongly that they were prepared through their career trajectories to handle the responsibilities associated with the position because they were responsible for encouraging others to contribute to goals achievement and securing commitment to a course of action from individuals and groups.

Sensitivity to the needs of the district, for the participants, was defined as the ability of the superintendent to perceive the needs and concerns of others in conflict and emotionally stressful situations, associated with the job performance, while knowing what information to communicate and to whom. Sensitive superintendents, by definition, also dealt tactfully with varying ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. They understand the importance of collaborating with stakeholders and have a range of understanding in supporting the needs of the district.

In completing the leadership self-assessment survey, six of the superintendents believed that they were capable of executing educational leadership skills as they scored themselves a rating of five (“almost always” action). These self-ratings indicated that the superintendents believed they possessed strong leadership direction and goal setting.
skills. Table 2 showed the remaining results of the participants scoring themselves in domain one.

Table 2

*Leadership Self-Assessment Domain 1: Educational Leadership: Leadership Direction, Goal Setting and Sensitivity to District Needs*

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In analyzing the data of respondents to Domain 1, the participants rated themselves at an average 4.3 rating in having leadership direction and an average 4.5 rating in goal setting. The highest average rating of 4.6 described their ability to be sensitive to the needs of the district in their leadership practices. Sensitivity in their role encompassed the idea that the superintendent understood the value of diversity and different perspectives on providing quality education to the diverse district populations as relative to the demographic description of the superintendent. One superintendent reflected on the her belief in how the community perception of her presence impacted her success as superintendent and she knew she had to remain sensitive in understanding what led to the perceptions. She explained, “Being in a district where you are in the
minority, I was often asked, ‘Who do you represent’? ‘What message are you sending about who you are’? ‘How does it help ‘our children’’? (Dr. Competent)

Another superintendent discussed how much media speculation about her capacity to hold the position would impact the perception held by her stakeholders. She stated, “In fact, because of being different in the community’s eyes, my certification was called into question, despite my being certified in nine states. (Superintendent Contrary)

Still another superintendent reflected upon her overall personal perception as to why she felt she was fit to hold the job of superintendent. She stated, “As I knew how to represent myself, my people and the Lord, I wanted to make sure that I represented what really was going on in my diverse community.” (Dr. Loyal)

Another superintendent provided support to Dr. Loyal’s belief by sharing that in her experience, she was often reminded that understanding different viewpoints and perspectives was important “because society dictates what you rise in.” (Dr. Justice)

As leadership direction reflected the lower end of the spectrum on their self-assessment, it was surmised that the superintendents recognized the fact that board members who served to push their personal agendas or personal biases can influence the leadership decisions that ultimately can affect the superintendents’ capacity to run the district. One superintendent reflected on her perception that the actions of her board were intentional sabotage, despite the success she experienced during her initial tenure as interim superintendent:

When you have a board member who is trying to fire you and is making it publicly known, you will be in places where people will walk up to you and say, Oh this person said they are going to terminate your contract, it makes it very difficult because you know you are trying to do the work and do the work for kids
and you know it is not your performance, you have been successful; so it is purely personal. (Superintendent Dedicated)

Another superintendent who began her first year with a strong approval rating reflected upon the reason she thought she had leadership direction, despite any agendas:

I overcame a vote of “no confidence” by running as fast as I could for as long as I was allowed; recognizing from the beginning that I was there to serve for a short period of time, no matter how successful I would be. (Superintendent Contrary)

Defying traditional assignments made certain that African American women superintendents immediately sought to take on district challenges before taking the opportunity to settle into the position. One superintendent said, “I am the first African American woman superintendent of my district.” (Dr. Competent)

Dr. Competent, because of this first time status, got to work immediately, believing that she had to clean house and manage everything. She took pride in knowing that she has hired all of her leadership cabinet. She found solace in sharing that it was her leadership direction that improved the district. This superintendent also expressed the importance that leadership direction had on her experience as it was vital for her position and would significantly impact future, aspiring African American women superintendents:

A black board member [of my former district] told me when I was leaving the district that if I had not done a great job, the district would never considered another black superintendent, let alone a black woman superintendent. (Dr. Competent)

Goal setting skills seemed to be the subdomain where the average rating was considered a reflection of the participants’ belief in the importance to the growth of a district as their primary job responsibility. The participants contended that they believed that the setting of the district goals should not be guided by the social, political, or
emotional decision-making that can hinder the growth and success of a school district, but rather by the importance of improving the district’s capacity for teaching and learning. This superintendent said, “We did what we had to do to get the work done. We had to make sure we covered our bases and everything else would evolve.” *(Dr. Justice)*

Another superintendent responded, “My redesign was to make the district purposeful, student-centered and courageous in our approach to learning. I believe I am the spokesperson of bravery in taking the risk of growing the district.” *(Dr. Loyal)*

In the end, when the participants reflected upon their capacity to hold the job of the superintendent, many concluded that even though they considered themselves qualified to be a superintendent, sometimes their disenfranchisement was often felt as a result of external factors they encountered and not characteristic of their ability to do the job. The overall sentiment shared by the participants suggested that their experiences in the position could serve as a cautionary tale for other African American women superintendents who consider themselves competent in doing their job.

**Theme 2: The Traditional Role of Women.** The superintendents believed that their experiences were in response to societal perceptions of the traditional role of women. The participants in the study discussed their recognition of the fact that their role as superintendent goes against the ideas of the traditional role of women in society. In a male-dominated position, it was not the expectation that women could handle the role of superintendent, and as such, the participants believed that the challenges faced were in reaction to the women receiving their position.
**Interviews.** One superintendent remembers a board member telling her that she was just a woman and was hired to handle their concerns. She said, “I am often reminded that I am a woman and need to stay in my place”. *(Dr. Risk)*

To that board member, Superintendent Dr. Risk felt like she was thought of as someone to implement his agenda. The other participants discussed their experiences about the traditional role of a woman serving as superintendent and the expectations placed upon them. They provided examples of how society reacted to their leadership. The participants also discussed their interpretation of how the traditional perceptions impacted their leadership:

> It’s been an interesting journey. It is very difficult for women in this industry. First of all, we do not get any shortcuts so white men can go right into positions bypassing the principalship, not having any experience. That does not happen for us. *(Superintendent Contrary)*

Dr. Loyal said, “A board member said, after I was chosen, “We chose the wrong superintendent because I was up against this white man. *(Dr. Loyal)*. Dr. Competent added,

> I found that during her tenure, many the board responses were representative of their traditional values. I can recall an incident when my decision to non-renew a popular male principal led to a board member making it publicly known that her intent was to terminate my position as the superintendent. I had went against tradition in terminating a male. *(Dr. Competent)*

One of the participants commented, “I come to work every day because I have co-workers and colleagues who build me up for being a strong woman, even when others try to tear me down for the same reason. *(Superintendent Dedicated)*

Another added, “You have to meet people where they are, with all of their misconceptions about what a woman can and cannot do, in order to be able to fully understand where your road begins.” *(Dr. Willing)*
Dr. Justice added, “Sometimes I felt like, because I was a woman, the board’s response to some of my actions was like, we are the boss and you are the help.”

Dr. Determined responded, “Teaching children, to me, is a priority, period. Man or woman doing it shouldn’t matter. And to me, it didn’t.”

One superintendent explained that her attempt at closing a district because of poor performance was as similar as society not hiring women. She expressed how tradition was more important than anything. She further explained,

You can’t lapse the school district, why? Because they were there for over100 years, so what they were an A-school, so? I was so confused about that and then I realized, if tradition was important for a building, imagine the beliefs about the traditional role of a woman versus the role of a superintendent. (Superintendent Militant)

Superintendent Dr. Willing discussed how the challenges of the traditional role of the woman in contrast to the role of the superintendent were, in her opinion, an excuse for an attempt to maintain the Good ‘Ole’ Boy Network. She called it, “Political bantering and scapegoating.”

Other superintendents discussed their belief that nepotism influenced the reaction to their leadership:

Dr. Tenacious stated, “I often struggled against the Good Ole’ Boy Network and nepotism was rampant.”

Superintendent Militant added, “The Good Ole Boys aren’t happy the women have left the home.”

The role of a superintendent, according to the participants, is about making a difference in the lives of students. The superintendents discussed how their service to a district helped them to stay involved in the social justice reform associated with their
appointment to the position. They believe that although they serve in limited contexts, participants thought that their ability to bring about successful change was limitless. They believed it was their responsibility to transform the lives of children, especially those children who lived in poverty.

Six of the superintendents discussed how important their superintendency was because they understood that education could transform families. Superintendent Dr. Perfect shared her beliefs that educating underrepresented children and improving their socioeconomic status was their responsibility as women. Dr. Perfect said,

My low performing schools are in the projects, but that does not mean the children cannot perform at high levels, it just means we have to work on addressing the poverty and then provide wrap-around services to get them out of the poverty. I am a mother, a woman, who feels compelled to take care of the children.

Dr. Perfect indicated that she believed that the change in the status of the family by bringing them out of poverty can grow a continuous generation of success in the family.

Other participants shared the same perspective on the impact that changing the family dynamics could have on education. Each self-reflected that their role as a woman traditionally mandated their nurturing nature when working with children. When they became superintendents, it became important to them to improve the family dynamics through education. One of the superintendents said,

If you are going to improve academic outcomes, you have to get kids out of poverty. So I can create and support all the reading and math programs I want, but if I don’t improve their economic conditions, it’s not going to work. I know I am one or two paychecks away from being back where I came from.

(Superintendent Contrary)
Superintendent Dedicated stated, “One of things I will say and my community says is that I have the ability to build rapport with people. So I haven’t had a problem bringing people to the table to support educating children.

In discussing the demographics of the district and how the data were changing as time progressed, one superintendent elaborated,

My district is 73% Hispanic and 7% Black and when I came to the district, we had the biggest black history month program for a 7% population; so I asked, ‘What are we doing for the Hispanic Heritage population?’ When I got the response of nothing, I said ‘and we got a 73% population”? This is going to stop. We are going to change this. We as a district was going to support their culture and heritage to support their learning capacity. (Dr. Competent)

Relative to demographic issues, Dr. Determined explained, “Even the smallest growth is celebrated; we have a large percentage of students with IEPs and we do not use that as a crutch. These students were still going to be citizens in our society.

Dr. Justice called attention to the No Child Left behind (NCLB) legislation and how this legislation influenced the change in leadership in her school district. She said,

I think NCLB made us think a little more about what we needed to do for children. It had us moving kids, finding the right methods to educate children and forced us to use data to create a learning tool for kids. Since failure was not an option in my district NCLB helped us grow children because it kept children moving. We intentionally took children to the next level because as an educator, we become whatever the children need. We know it has as impact on their lives and can change the future and the future of their family dynamics. (Dr. Justice)

Superintendent Dr. Competent also discussed the impact of her role as superintendent and the contradiction of being a traditional woman in her experiences. She was challenged by the stereotypes associated with what a woman was expected to do and not by what they were doing:

Stereotypes still include the need for women to be at home taking care of the family, not progressing to higher responsibilities. Even in terms of salary, men
make higher because they are supposed to be the breadwinner to support the family.

Another superintendent added that her board was aggressive in constantly reminding her that her lack of portraying the traditional woman role has become a media concern and as such a societal concern. Superintendent Contrary commented, “The reporter contended that the lack of being married or in an active relationship does not model the expectations of the community.”

Superintendent Dr. Competent, also later discussed that this was not a one-time experience. She recalled experiencing this attitude on more than one occasion, explaining, “For at least two other positions, I was denied the opportunity to apply because many board members attempted to dissuade my desire to be the superintendent, suggesting I acquire more experience before taking on the challenge.”

Superintendent Dr. Perfect discussed that many times she had to use her feminine attributes to get things done. She knew she had to use this to encourage support for decisions:

I think women have to be careful about being overly aggressive; especially in the South; they are expected to be very feminine; not docile, but very soft-spoken. My role as superintendent is considered a challenge to traditional society as I had to use my personal experiences as a Southern ‘belle’ as a source for growing my system and being able to make decisions; for people to accept what I was presenting. (Dr. Perfect)

Participants Superintendent Dedicated and Superintendent Militant discussed that making certain decisions was risky because the reactions often illustrated how society felt about women making certain decisions.

I felt that I had to be a risk taker to complete the tasks that I faced. And often when criticized, I would counterclaim that if my statements or actions were made by a man, he would be seen as a visionary. (Superintendent Dedicated)
I was constantly hiding from what was called liberal opinions about education in order to fight in the defense of my constituents, especially in a state with strict conservative views regarding education. Being a woman in this role meant I had to be careful what I said. But I took chances anyway. *(Superintendent Militant)*

A part of the role of a traditional woman is the ability to organize the family dynamics. Superintendent Dr. Competent explained that in her experiences. She said, “People believe that a woman will move wherever her husband is, but a man may not move for the wife because she has to organize the move and the future home.”

The idea that women organize things supports the participants’ belief that they have the organizational skills necessary to support their role as superintendent.

**Self-Assessment Survey: Organizational Skills and Ability to Resolve Complex Problems.** Organizational skills reflected the ability of the superintendent to plan their own work and the work of others so that the resources are being used appropriately. In the self-assessment survey, the participants rated an average score of 4.1 on the question that applied to schedules, timelines, and milestones within the organizational skills domain, indicating they believed that they exhibited strong organizational skills as a part of their nature of being a woman. Table 3 shows the results of the domain assessing the organizational skills of the participants.

Table 3

*Leadership Self-Assessment Domain 3: Organizational Skills*

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Although the average in this domain is the lowest average rating in the entire survey instrument, it is still considered to be a high average illustrating the belief that the participants perceive that they are strong organizers. Respondents also shared their beliefs on resolving complex problems, such as their ability to make sound judgments and their ability to be results-oriented. The participants agreed that decisions that required making a judgment had to be guided by doing right by children in all of their actions; which is, according to the participants, considered a feminine trait. Table 4 illustrate how the participants rated themselves when discussing if they believed that their role as a woman had an impact on their ability to resolve complex problems.

Table 4

*Leadership Self-Assessment Domain 4: Ability to Resolve Complex Problems*

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The superintendents’ ability to make sound judgements was rated an average 4.8 in sub-domain one: judgement skills, across all participants. Participants discussed how they believed they made solid decisions that grew the district, despite societal biases. Comments included the following,
It was my stubbornness and independence that generally resonated with the community and although I believe people see as a feminist, I made decisions that worked. Why, because ‘I do not form my beliefs by consensus, I form consensus around my beliefs.’ I’m on my third contract, so it must have worked. (Dr. Loyal)

I am most proud that because of my ability to resolve the complex problems that plagued the school district for years prior to my arrival, I was able to accomplish becoming the first African American woman to lead successfully an A-rated school district in my state, for 4 consecutive years. (Dr. Tenacious)

I understood that Democracy requires a decision to be made, so I have to represent a single voice. So where I began working with a fully online K-12 school with a 700-student population, because of my decisions, I now have 4000 students and a waiting list of about 2500 additional students. (Dr. Risk)

Leadership is absolutely about serving others; if you don’t have a Servant’s heart and you are an egomaniac, then you cannot lead. We used our judgment to improve our academic outcomes. I now have a 90% approval rating, with a district that had significantly improved. (Superintendent Contrary)

Each of the superintendents found that their convictions about education often led to them making unilateral decisions that ultimately worked in their favor. These decisions often required immediate processing skills and they relied on their intellect to resolve the issue. While others still had to use their personal charm to persuade stakeholders to support their decisions:

My design for school improvement was to dream outside of the box as if there were no box and to collaborate with everyone, all school, and community stakeholders and encourage them to be accountable for school improvement. That’s what has worked for us. We improved in our state report card to prove it. (Superintendent Dedicated)

I have been superintendent for 12 years. Wait, that number of years, which resulted in my being awarded four contracts (laughs). The school district is now recognized. We even changed our name as a show of solidarity for our growth, especially with the school board. (Dr. Justice)
Superintendent Dr. Justice reflected on how she had to remind the board of their issuance of a new contract when they began to question her skills. One superintendent reflected upon her likeability that governed her ability to garner support,

When resources became available and I was credited with bringing the resources, one board member told me that I was, so far, the best-received Superintendent in the district to-date. (Dr. Perfect)

Now, the concept of the traditional role of a woman has been challenged by the idea that these leadership traits were not relegated to a specific gender role. Of the participants, citing the challenging nature of their responsibilities, only three superintendents rated an average 5.0 that their actions were always results-oriented. They made the tough decisions that sometimes would be in opposition to the ideals of other stakeholders. The two that indicated their decisions yielded the intended results experienced success in their own way. Comments were,

I remember an issue with new school construction when board members delegated the building construction meetings to the associate superintendent because he was a male. I often attended the meetings and dismissed the attendance of the associate superintendent under my charge, knowing that recommendations had to come through me. I intended to be as literate as the associate superintendent, if not more. The new school was built without a glitch. (Superintendent Contrary)

As a non-traditional practice, we followed our students through to college matriculation during my first tenure. I’m a data scientist, I like to analyze things. As a result of a study of the data we had about math remediation and post-secondary completion, we started doing a remediation course with the community colleges in their senior year so we could them remediate them here. And then the students could begin college in college-credit bearing courses. We found we were down to zero percent for remediation courses in Math upon entry into college. (Dr. Loyal)

The other respondents averaged a range of 4.4 to 4.8 in their belief that they were results-oriented, with a frequency of 4.6. The superintendents ventured into discussing how important they found that the growth of a district is in decision-making processes.
One superintendent discussed how she looked beyond her title when making the best decisions for her district,

Leading a district is not about the title of the position being held per se. Instead, when the data from every aspect of the school district are collected and analyzed the focus continues to be on the fight for academic excellence. To get there, we had to build relationships. And it worked. (Dr. Willing)

The participants shared that the use of good judgment and the resolution to being results-oriented sometimes require non-traditional actions.

This is much like in the societal belief, according to Superintendent Dr. Willing, in “hiring a woman to do a man’s job.”

Overall, for the participants in this study, their role as a woman made them equally suitable for the position as their male counterparts:

As women, we are just built to be nurturers, caring for children. So much so that I knew any decision I made on one day concerning children could piss someone off. But I look at it as, ‘if it is good for children, then I am going to piss someone off.’ (Superintendent Dedicated)

Finally, the participants also recognized how serving in this capacity against tradition paved the way for others successfully to acquire a position. The sentiment that each was responsible for helping other African American women attain a superintendent was prevalent.

Superintendent Dr. Justice shared, “I always try to train people. I took two of my staff members to the superintendent retreat because I have to teach them to grow.”

Superintendent Dr. Competent refers to her superintendent workshop held annually and designed to support aspiring superintendents by providing guidance in the process and sharing experiences as cautionary tales to govern the expectations in the role of superintendent.
Having served as a successful superintendent of a public school district for more than 15 years, I have ventured beyond the position to create an aspiring superintendent preparation program to help pave the way for beginners in the northern United States. (Dr. Competent)

Although some participants did not create programs such as Dr. Competent, participants acknowledged that they were serving as role models for other African American women who aspire to be superintendent.

I support my community and have become the hero of my own experiences. I believed that it became important to nurture future superintendents like me. Because of this, many see me as a positive role model in my determination, risk-taking, and my commitment to saving all of my districts. (Superintendent Militant)

Superintendent Contrary also furthered that her role was to inform aspiring superintendents of the significance of their appointment and how important it would be to understand the expectations prior to accepting a position:

Obviously, it is important to me that I grow the next generation of female leadership and superintendents. When I think of the roles and responsibilities of the chief administrator district, it would be great to move into a new leadership position with guidelines of minimal expectations. Then the new administrator would have the time necessary to move forward in a less stressful manner (Superintendent Contrary)

Superintendent Dr. Determined shared her experiences by writing a book based upon her doctoral dissertation concerning the self-experiences as an African American woman superintendent,

My district staff has always been given and voice and I encourage them to grow into my position. Writing a book to share with aspiring African American women superintendents fosters my belief that people of diverse backgrounds can find solace and enjoyment in this job. (Dr. Determined)

**Theme 3: The Balance of a Superintendent’s Life.** The superintendents recognized the need to lead a balanced life. The African American women superintendents who participated in this study discussed the importance of family and the
support system necessary in order to have balanced family-career experiences. Participants described the idea of a balanced family as the ability to put the position into perspective whereby the role of the superintendent does not become overwhelming. To the participants, it was the ability to be able to do the job effectively and to still maintain a personal life that included family, their religious practices, and any other social experiences that are not found at work.

**Interviews.** Family life outside of the job was expressed as the main component of the superintendents’ life that ensures that any negative experiences on the job are offset by the things that happen when the superintendents are not at work. It, as many of the superintendents would describe, was the ‘woosa’ moment for relaxation, peace, and solace. When asked their reaction to the belief that they had to have a balanced life, Superintendent Dr. Justice explained, “When work has been challenging, I find solace in shopping with my husband. I can shop and he knows how bad my day was just by the amount of money I spent.”

Superintendent Militant explained that her balance occurred when she arrived home and became a wife and a lover of her animals:

> There is no greater peace from my job than when I walk into my home and the dogs are barking as they miss me. Even my husband sometimes wonder what makes me more at peace; him or the dogs. How do I relax? I walk out of my office and let the office stay there.

Superintendent Dr. Willing used her military reserve responsibilities to support her balance away from the role of superintendent:

> I was still active reserves when I first acquired this position and even though I am no longer active, I found that on my duty weekends, I was not a superintendent. I was in the military and the two paths did not cross. It was great!
Superintendent Dedicated discussed how significant it was for her husband to assist in maintaining the balance necessary to be a successful superintendent and to also remain a good parent to her children:

When I became superintendent, my kids were young; but I have a very supportive husband who is there when I can’t be to pick up the slack. I have two amazing children when I look at what I have to deal with every day.

Well, I will say this, if you don’t have a life; this job will take your life. Not mine. (Chuckling), Dr. Determined expressed as she described the importance of balancing work with personal life.

Superintendent Dr. Perfect talked about how her sense of having a personal life made certain that when she needed support for her personal well-being, there was someone there to help her find solace. She added, “My husband and I always have date nights; let me say that again, date nights, plural; because at the end of the day, I made a commitment to him as well”. Dr. Perfect explained that making sure her husband knew she was still his wife was important for him. She shared that she can remember when she expressed interest in the position, and her husband’s only concern was the idea of her still being able to come home at decent hours.

One superintendent talked about how the non-traditional nature of her district keeps her balanced by allowing her to still be an active member of her family. Superintendent Dr. Risk explained, “Working online allows me to remain at home with my children.”

Superintendent Dr. Competent also talked about how having the family dynamics helped her to be able to put her job into perspective. She shared that while she was getting her certification, often she engaged in her classes perplexed by the major roles
that superintendents had to assume in their position. She often questioned her desire to
make sacrifices that she thought she would have to make. She asked herself, for example,
“What are you willing to sacrifice and do for your relationship with your family?”

Superintendent Dr. Competent recalled how that the question was challenged on
the day that she was being given the opportunity to become an area superintendent for a
school district and she suffered a major family loss. She laments the pain of the decision
to walk away from the meeting that was set up to offer her the position. She felt like she
was doing the right thing not to neglect her family obligations. She said, “I was invited to
a lunch to be offered a job as an area superintendent when my daughter was in an
accident and died. Nothing comes before my husband and children. I spent every
weekend with them”. Although she would later be offered and accepted the position, she
recalled during the interview that it was the first stage in ensuring that the role of the
superintendent never interfered with her family.

Superintendent Dr. Loyal discussed the importance of family in the balancing of
career and personal life, but she emphasized the importance of her faith and her religious
practices,

I believed this job only gave me a higher purpose in my faith. And if that were
true, why would I then neglect my faith? It just made sense to keep and even
strengthen my faith to do God’s work. That is who I am as a superintendent.
About the work. (Dr. Loyal)

Superintendent Contrary relayed the same sentiment as she added, “Knowing who
I serve made many days feel a lot better (Chuckling). When you have people out to get
you, you better know who to trust in him (referencing to God and her faith).”

**Self-Assessment Survey.** Much of the leadership self-assessment instrument
supported the idea of being organized in order to keep things in perspective. The
participating superintendents made references to other domains in their narratives. Although comparing the value of the instrument on the nature of its impact on having a balanced family life was not significant enough to serve as empirical support, there are factors to consider when balancing work and home.

Achieving a balanced family-work life can be very challenging. When each superintendent factored in the idea that each aspect of the balancing act has its own unique set of issues, the overlapping of the two challenges can significantly impact work or change the family dynamics. Each superintendent was adamant in their narratives that work and personal lives had to be a separate entities and each should complement the other. The inability to do so can impact the role of a superintendent.

Superintendent Dr. Competent put a final perspective on this issue when she used her family loss to help her move forward in her career by helping her to keep everything in perspective. She gave her final comment on the theme and shared how having a personal life can bring peace to the job of the superintendent when the superintendent remembers the importance of family and a life outside of the district office. Dr. Competent said, “I know that when the weekend comes, I am leaving this district and going home. And home is where I am, and people are most happy with me.”

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked: To what extent do African American women superintendents attribute their experiences to race, gender and intersectionality?

Theme 4: Public scrutiny and personal attacks. The superintendents believed that their image as African American women often led to public scrutiny and personal attacks. The African American women superintendents discussed how the image of
African American women impacted their experience as a superintendent. Although the superintendents viewed themselves as competent and capable of performing the role of the superintendent, they found their efforts to dispel the negative stereotype of being an African American woman presented challenges during their tenure.

**Interviews.** As the superintendents began to share, it was evident that they shared the belief that because of the image of the African American woman, they found themselves the subject of personal attacks and public scrutiny at levels higher than their counterparts. Superintendent Contrary spoke of her first experience with public scrutiny when she stated, “During my residency, I was reported to have a vote of no-confidence, and I was not even the official superintendent. Someone actually suggested it was my hair that offended people. “She indicated that her looks did not define her ability to do the job, but that it defined how other people saw her in the role.

Superintendent Militant revealed her first experience coming immediately upon appointment when she wanted to close a failing school district and fought against succumbing to the will of the State Senator: “The fight between me and the Senator was unnecessary, but she wanted me to fetch and step and I don’t do that.” Superintendent Militant indicated that the Senator’s reaction seemed like a superiority complex designed to relegate her inferior status as an African American woman in society.

Superintendent Perfect recognized that she would have to use her southern charm to ensure people did not have a negative perception of her: “I always found that people were looking to see if I was nice. If I wasn’t, they were ready to pounce on me,” Dr. Perfect, commented. Superintendent Dr. Perfect shared that she had a poker face that wore a smile over the face of her anger.
“In the beginning, I fought with the media at least once a month about a misquoted remark or a statement that got out of hand,” Superintendent Dedicated stated.

“I was told I could never succeed as an African American woman superintendent in this school system. They said the local population was not ready for me and my attitude,” Dr. Willing said.

Dr. Justice stated, “You see this face, my facial expressions, my responses; a white journalist would be all over it; but you understand me. And it’s simply because you are a black woman.”

“I had to learn to deal with what people perceived me to be as a black woman. It didn’t change me, I just learned to deal with it,” Dr. Determined stated.

Superintendent Dedicated added that she recalled that “all” of her decisions faced scrutiny because she was an African American woman,

All of my decisions, at one time, seemed to ‘piss’ someone off. I attributed the sentiment to the fact that I was seen as the proverbial ‘angry black woman’, even in a district whose population mirrored my race. But I was determined that if I was to be successful for the children my color would just have to ‘piss’ someone off.

Steele and Aronson (1995) once used the term stereotype threat as the subconscious thought Superintendent Contrary used to explain the discriminatory reactions to African American women superintendents. Superintendent Contrary discussed how she was seen as a triple Affirmative Action threat. She added, “I am black, a woman and a Latina, so I constantly have my Obama moments. I was criticized for everything.” She furthered that sometimes the reactions of the community were based solely on stereotypical images that African American women are perceived to be. “I
faced challenges of the stereotypes that were associated with wearing natural hair. I was seen as the angry black woman.”

Another superintendent reflected on how people reacted upon meeting her and realizing she was a black woman. She explained, “I was told in many occasions that I was not what was expected to be in-person. One lady told me that I did not sound like a black woman. I did not understand what it meant to sound like a black woman and could only assume that it meant that I, as an African American woman, was expected to speak in a different dialect and verbiage.”

Not all of the superintendents would find an image issue in their experiences. One superintendent discussed how her experiences initially were removed from the challenge of being a black woman. She explained,

I am a superintendent who does not believe my image as a black woman plays a role in my superintendent role. In fact, I served as the first African American President-Elect of the State’s New Superintendent Association as well as the first black member of the state’s Superintendent Association. I was also able to create the Commission on Diversity and Inclusivity. (Dr. Loyal)

The participants shared that the challenges in their experiences were influenced by society’s reaction to their perception of what African American women superintendents would do in leadership positions. Dr. Loyal would later share, “I remembered a time during my tenure when I felt always under attack by certain people, even when I countered it with goodwill towards the community.” Additional comments were:

The move from a majority minority district to one where I was the minority was challenging. About every member of the community was a Trump supporter. I could not do anything right for my first year. I was surprised I got the job. (Dr. Justice)
Superintendent Dr. Justice later reflected on the view that she was nice to everyone in the beginning and felt this ultimately helped her change the image in her experiences.

“I am objective and realistic; and this, to me, is not me being an angry black woman at all. I just want to inspire young girls to be vocal, use their talents, and serve in whatever capacity they desire to do so. Some community members thought otherwise. (Dr. Willing)"

Some of the participants indicated that because many of their actions often met public scrutiny, their subordinates tended to shy away from being influenced by their words or leadership.

Superintendent Dr. Risk shared that she had to learn how not to be affected by the stereotyping. She explained, “Other people’s perception do not ‘jive’ with me. When I walk into a room, there are a lot of assumptions about me. But I walked into the room anyway, ready for the job.”

Superintendent Dr. Tenacious shared that her confidence in developing others was often mistaken as arrogance when interacting with others. She shared, “I had to reconcile with the fact that no matter what I said, I was often explaining my response to assure people that I was not a threat.” Superintendent Dr. Tenacious recalls the day she internally decided to not assure people anymore and found that, at this time, her responses had gained her leverage in acquiring support for her position.

The perception that African American women who were educated were considered to be dangerous was suggested throughout the interviews of the participants. Superintendent Dr. Willing indicated that she always struggled to develop her sense of self while serving as superintendent where she was the minority because of personal attacks. She contended, “When a reporter asked me if I enjoyed being black in America
and I asked him why it mattered, I got more issues about not responding ‘appropriately’ than support against an obviously discriminating angle to report.”

Superintendent Militant battled with her image as an African American woman immediately when she was voted in the position. Superintendent Militant was concerned that many people thought that she did not deserve the right to be superintendent. She explained,

A senator from the region called me for a conference with me to ‘acclimate’ me to the position. The senator called me on phone and told me that I represented ‘fine American citizens’ who worked in the county for over 100s of years and that I needed to understand the history of an American school system. I thought about the recurring use of the term ‘American’ and I inquired if the ‘conference’ was to clarify to me that I was not a true American. When the conference ended without her interpretation of a good resolution, I later received a letter on official letterhead indicating that the senator had introduced legislation limiting the scope of county superintendents’ authority. The bid failed; and because of it, members of the school board ensured me that the Senator was coming for my job as I ‘did not know my place.’ (Superintendent Militant)

Self-Assessment Survey: Oral Communication and Developing Self and Others. The participants reflected upon the idea that sometimes their oral communication impacted their experiences. Ten superintendents rated themselves a score of five across all questions in the oral communication domain, with one superintendent scoring a rating of four on one question and rated five on the remaining questions. The overall 4.9 average rating illustrated that the superintendents believed that they had good oral communication and that they were able to make clear their intent in leading the district. The participant that rated herself a four on Question 1 attributed her response to the idea that she served in the district for so long, her contributions tended to fade into the setting, and were brought forward only when it suited the stakeholders involved. Superintendent
Dedicated added, “I began to stay away from being too vocal, as my efforts made me look as I am being a bully or overbearing, rather than a visionary.”

As the participants completed their self-assessment surveys, they shared that they believed that some of the stereotypical responses might have come as a result of their oral communication skills and the lack of understanding by those receiving the information. Table 5 shows the results of the oral communication skills ratings held by the superintendents.

Table 5

*Leadership Self-Assessment Domain 2: Oral Communication*

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Many of the superintendents felt that it was important to be transparent and direct, even if it was perceived as the angry black woman. Superintendent Dedicated indicated that her desire to maintain her honesty made it difficult sometimes to communicate the intent of her expectations. This resulted in her giving redirectives and being perceived as being bossy.

Superintendent Dr. Perfect responded that her actions were scrutinized so frequently, she had to learn to tread lightly when making decisions as she was the minority in her role as superintendent. She added, “Once I was criticised by my deputy superintendent and asked to give the numbers concerning diversity in the candidate pool
for replacing her position as she was retiring.” Superintendent Dr. Perfect felt like she was being attacked because she was African American and the belief was that she was looking only for another African American. The deputy had accused her of reverse racism.

Superintendent Dr. Risk indicated that her oral communication skills actually hid her identity and allowed for her role to be respected. When she met her colleagues in person, she felt different. She said, “I used my voice for much of the communication in the human world. But when I attend meetings that require my physical presence, I find myself surrounded by other superintendents who seemed shocked.”

The superintendents highlighted that they had no problem communicating to individuals, small groups and large groups. Many times some of them found themselves having to explain what they meant by their words. In one instance, the idea of being an African American woman superintendent created so many stereotypical perceptions that forced one superintendent to share that she always had to defend her actions or comments. Dr. Determined added, “Despite remaining professional, I found myself constantly having to ‘apologize’ for being an African American woman.”

Other superintendents talked about how the image of being an African American woman impacted their communication skills in terms of how they presented themselves and how that presentation was always important before others heard what the African American women superintendents brought to the position. Dr. Perfect commented, African American women had to be careful, especially in leadership, of how they were perceived.
Superintendent Contrary interjected, “a reporter challenged that I was only ‘the blackface’ of the district and that the previous superintendent was the actual leader. I did not know how to take that comment.”

Citing the challenging nature of overcoming negative stereotypes that characterize African American women, three superintendents rated themselves as strong in being results-oriented. They shared how significant it was to overcome the stereotypes in effort to create a positive working environment.

Additional reporting on the survey reflected African American women superintendents rating themselves the lowest average when assessing their ability to develop the skills of others in their districts. The 4.4 average rating in this sub-domain means that the participants recognized that developing skills in others was a challenge because of the inability of others to believe or trust in what they presented. Superintendent Contrary said, “Some critics were so reactionary that, in fact, my certification was called into question, despite being certified in nine states.

Many of the respondents indicated that their being perceived as being too aggressive made it hard for them to influence their co-workers and subordinates. Consequently, many of the respondents agreed that understanding the importance of developing others often led to them reflecting on why the colleagues believed that they could not help develop them. Some of the respondents shared that they worked hard to prove otherwise. Still, other respondents know that developing others was a growth measure for them to improve upon and that their ability to develop others took some time. Table 4 illustrates that the participants believed they supported growth in aspiring superintendents, by rating themselves an average 4.4 in their ability to develop others and
4.5 in their understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses that allow them to do so. Table 6 provides the data.

Table 6

*Leadership Self-Assessment Domain 5: Developing Self and Others*

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Knowing the significance of removing the stereotypes and in influencing aspiring African American women superintendents, one superintendent used her dissertation to publish a book outlining the pathway of African American women superintendents through her perspective. She believed that the book offered guidance against the barriers and challenges experienced and expected. She explained,

> I wrote a book about her pathway to the superintendency that emerged from my dissertation topic that discussed my journey of being an African American educator aspiring to be a superintendent. I need other African American women to know that this job is attainable. *(Dr. Determined)*

One superintendent thought that it was her responsibility to support other aspiring African American women superintendents. Superintendent Dr. Perfect stated, “I believe that women leaders have to open their own doors. I tried to dispel this notion and I am seen amongst my subordinates as a role model.”
What African American women are perceived to be has clearly impacted the experiences of the superintendents. In the end, each shared that they found that their position required them to move beyond the negative perceptions; that they had to endure the personal attacks and to endure the public scrutiny for the opportunity to lead the districts. Superintendent Militant reiterated that belief when she shared that being a superintendent meant running with the toughest men and learning to keep up.

**Theme 5: The Impact of race, gender and intersectionality.** The superintendents believed that race, gender and intersectionality characterized their experiences. Of the 11 African American women superintendents who participated in the study, many found that the challenges of their job often centered on race and gender. As the data generated the themes of this research, the issue of race, gender, and intersectionality was defined as the beliefs the participants shared that their challenges were a result of their being an African American woman in conservative settings. Many of the 11 superintendents worked in areas in which they were the minority, despite districts suggesting diversity in their school system.

**Interviews.** The participants shared that there were many times when their actions were challenged and the topics of race and gender became a part of the justification for the reactions.

As the researcher and participants began discussing the issue of gender, the participants shared interesting perspectives. One superintendent reflected upon her first experience with a board member who questioned her gender and preferences. Superintendent Contrary reported, “A board member literally accused me of being a lesbian because I had not been in an active relationship since I have been here.”
On another occasion, Superintendent Contrary said that the same board member found it easy to suggest that she was incompetent because the board member asked a male subordinate of the district his recommendation on a major district initiative without consulting her. When the board member responded, she was very aggressive in her stance, “I was not consulted because it was a man’s capacity to understand.”

As they continued to share their experiences, the superintendents also revealed their feelings towards the belief that gender would continually impact their tenure as superintendent. Dr. Perfect commented, “My experience as a woman superintendent developed as I learned that women always had to do more than men, just because we are women. I couldn’t believe how true it would actually be.”

Superintendent Dr. Perfect expanded her comments to detail her belief about the significance of gender when being supported in the role of superintendent. She added, “Many male superintendents had the support of women subordinates taking care of them. Women will take care of male leaders, but very seldom do they take care of women leaders. This was also offensive to me.”

Another superintendent discussed her experiences concerning gender and the impact it had on building relationships with other colleagues during her tenure. Dr. Risk said, “One day, another district superintendent chided that I was too feminine in how I respond to discipline for students.”

When she asked him to elaborate, Superintendent Dr. Risk explained that she was confronted with the colleague explaining that women tend to be too soft on discipline policies. Dr. Risk stated that the superintendent viewed his approach to be a better
approach, commenting, “The hardline approach he took was visionary. The response I gave was nauseating!” (Laughing and fake gagging)

The other participants also indicated their response to the role of gender in the challenges that they faced. Superintendent Dr. Willing stated, “You can’t think as a woman you can handle all of this. I was flabbergasted.” Dr. Willing said this was the response given to her by the dissenting board member who voted against her appointment. She was surprised that the male superintendent was so direct.

Superintendent Militant added, “You better know how to keep up with the boys. I thought to myself, who was she talking to? A woman condescending to another woman, wow!” This was in response to advice given to her when she was voted into her position.

The remaining participants shared their experiences and gave examples that stood out as the most significant in their minds:

When women are leaders, the assumption is there will be drama. Women and ‘drama queens’ are synonymous terms. But sometimes with my other sisters in the field, it was true and I hated it when I saw it. And I saw it often. (Dr. Determined)

Why women always found some way to be in drama was beyond me; I had one woman to accuse me of reverse racism because I disagreed with her proposal on a project about creating non-inclusive classes for the ESL population. The project made no sense in an immersion district. (Dr. Competent)

Dr. Justice injected, “I had a board member tell me he saw problems in me as a woman and did not think I was a good candidate. He was worried that I would be too emotional and could not make decisions objectively.”

Superintendent Dr. Tenacious commented, “This parent flat out just called me ‘a woman.’ He said something like, “You are acting just like a woman. I wanted to slap him!”
Superintendent Dr. Loyal added, when referred to as a woman, “I had to tell some board members to get over it.”

Some of the superintendents became emotional when they were sharing their perspectives. It was evident that they were impacted by these experiences. The participants’ perspectives on race were shared as the superintendents responded to the question about working with diverse populations. The open-ended question led to a series of responses from similar perspectives that show that the superintendents felt they equally had encounters with race as a factor in their challenges.

When one superintendent found herself immediately faced with racial conflict in her district that had a recurring presence, it was important that the decisions made resulted in sustainable implications for dismantling the segregated practice. Dr. Justice, for example, stated, “I dismantled the segregation and found that about every four years or so, race would come up as an issue in the district and I would have to dismantle it again and again.”

The idea that race issues would pop-up once every once and a while made it seem intentional by those participants who sparked the issue. Dr. Justice stated, “The deficiency in the district was about adult prejudices.”

Superintendent Dr. Justice was very descriptive when she shared a specific incident that sparked one of the pop-up issues that occurred during her tenure. She said, I remember that it was during my time that the first African American became a new sitting member of the school board. The idea that we shared the same last name led to a series of unethical accusations that we were related as justification for why he was appointed. Once race is combatted, students become the focal point. (Dr. Justice)
Another superintendent found that her issue of race was about her not identifying with her culture. Dr. Determined commented, “One board member criticized me and accused me of false representation of the African American culture because he said I ‘acted white’.”

The board president specifically chided the superintendent for her culture depiction, particularly in her presentation of her Western features (i.e., her hair): “I am offended by your lack of being natural.” The superintendent said that the board president reacted vehemently to her presentation of herself. Dr. Determined explained, “He said I was not being truthful or transparent because I wore a weave extension.

Superintendent Dr. Determined also shared, “It was the constant requests for diversity training that sent the message that race became a focal point during my tenure as superintendent.”

Some of the other participants shared similar stories with their own perspective that highlighted their experiences:

When I became the superintendent of a district where I was the minority in population and leadership role, many challenged my leadership. Many were Trump supporters who did not mind waving the Confederate flag in my face and tell me why I was not the best leader. I became ‘a small frog’ in a countless stream of alligators who thought my cultural difference would hinder my ability to lead. (Dr. Tenacious)

Superintendent Dr. Tenacious expressed the belief that the blatant and offensive responses from her community was designed to remind her that, although she was the superintendent, to them she was still inferior.

I recall the ‘black and white bus incident’ where in the 2000s I was forced to confront the fact that buses in my district were segregated. We still had white and black buses in the United States at this time. I could not believe this was a challenge I would have to face. (Dr. Justice)
Superintendent Dr. Justice was not surprised by having to face challenges more than recognizing the magnitude of this specific challenge. A challenge that she went on to explain should have ended decades ago. Both Superintendent Militant and Superintendent Dedicated shared how each felt the same way, despite Superintendent Militant seeing diversity in her former military career and Superintendent Dedicated growing up in the Deep South,

Coming from the military where racial diversity is the norm, I didn’t realize that being an African American in the U.S. was still so ‘civil rights’- challenged. That Senator made sure I got reacquainted with racism as it occurs on the home front on a daily basis. (Superintendent Militant)

The South has never removed racism; but to tell me that as an African American woman, ‘my days were numbered’ was too much of a challenging experience for me to digest, especially when this was the 21st Century in an educational environment. (Superintendent Dedicated)

Superintendent Contrary recalled the incident in which she was told to fix her hair by a board member and how she could not reconcile with the correlation between her leadership skills and her hairstyle. She felt the inner struggle of wondering if changing her image would make her a better leader, in the eyes of the community.

When I was jokingly told to ‘fix my hair’ by a colleague, it was said with an ounce of truth. I felt like belting out a verse from Maya Angelou’s ‘Phenomenal Woman.’ The issue that needed investigation should have to do with educational leadership and school improvement instead of choices about hair styles. (Superintendent Contrary)

I remember being told by some community members and teachers that as superintendent I had to work with people who did not like me simply because. When I asked what the cause was, no one would respond because they already knew. (Dr. Willing)

Superintendent Dr. Willing illustrated that the struggle of Superintendent Contrary was only a microcosm of the bigger picture of racism and genderism as it applied to the position of superintendent.
To be accused of not liking my own kind because I shot down a proposal for an all-black male mentoring class, was ignorant and not worthy of me responding. My focus was on multiculturalism and to approve a proposal for an all-black male mentoring class would have weakened the multicultural focus of the educational program. (Dr. Perfect)

Can you believe a parent had the nerve to call me a racist? It was hilarious because she was African American, and so am I. It made for an amazing 1st meeting. It took everything out of me not to laugh during the meeting. (Dr. Risk)

Both Superintendent Dr. Perfect and Dr. Risk found themselves being accused of reverse racism themselves when they struggled with supporting the programs being introduced by African American counterparts in their systems. They shared that it was as if being African American gave other African Americans with whom they worked a pass in having low goals and expectations and that they would be supported in the work simply for being of the same culture.

The final superintendent pointed out her avoidance of the race issue:

I didn’t talk about race and when it was brought up, I quickly dismissed the conversation and diverted attention to other aspects of the educational program that needed to be addressed. If it was going to be an issue, I rather find another district. (Dr. Competent)

Defined by the interconnectedness of two social variables, intersectionality explores how challenges are exacerbated by a double negative connotation. When race and gender were discussed with the participants as a double whammy against their role as superintendent, three superintendents spoke specifically about the way in which intersectionality made their experiences challenging.

Superintendent Dedicated stated, “I have continuously stood up against the challenges in my district and the challenges I also attributed to my race and gender.”

Dr. Loyal shared an experience that she had with the district board of education. She said,
I remember saying to a board member, “Your problem is there are two things that you are never going to change. I remember my words, ‘I’m never, ever not going to be a woman and I’m never ever not going to be Black. So you better get used to it.” (Dr. Loyal)

The district had never had woman in the position at that school, never had an African American; they only had Caucasian males in chief leadership positions. So I, as the first African American woman superintendent in the school district was definitely a new thing. (Dr. Competent)

Superintendent Dr. Justice realized that she had eventually accept that peoples’ biases governed their thoughts and that she could not afford to spend time apologizing for being both African American and a woman.

I learned to become comfortable in my skin as an African American woman in a district with racial tensions and gendered philosophies. So no one will ever have a limit on me because I am going to break through it. (Dr. Justice)

Superintendent Dr. Willing also spent time struggling with why her race was so important a descriptor as to her ability to serve in the role of superintendent. She also found herself spending too much time responding to her feelings about her race and gender.

Describing the experience of being the first or the only African American woman in any position is almost beyond normal description. I felt like I was looking at myself, outside of myself, trying to rationalize why being an African American woman mattered so much in this position. (Dr. Willing)

Of course it was amazing to me to realize that here we are gradually moving toward the middle of the 21st century, and yet, people still are making such an issue of what it means to be an African American woman, the stereotypes, the disrespect, but you can’t change people or their thoughts. (Dr. Tenacious)

Superintendent Dr. Tenacious attributed the issue to the inability to remove stereotypes and biases from people’s ideologies. She recognized that trying to change their thoughts was impossible. Superintendent Dr. Determined finalized her thoughts about the issue by conveying her belief that almost everything negative about being an
African American woman superintendent is not about not being able to do the job; but more about people’s perception of what doing the job means. She explains,

In my book, you will see how what people thought about my trajectory to the superintendency and when you analyze it, all of their excuses for complaints can trace itself back to race and gender and the combination of the two. *(Dr. Determined)*

**Self-Assessment Survey.** Respondents also agreed that when they completed the self-assessments, the responses sparked experiences shared in the interviews of how race, gender, and the intersectionality of the two led to some of the challenges they faced.

Two superintendents discussed how intersectionality impacted their overall approach to getting results in the districts. They discussed the broad perspective that governs the significance of generating results in the districts. Dr. Loyal stated, “My redesign is to make the district purposeful, student-centered, and courageous in our approach to learning despite my race or my gender.”

Dr. Justice explained, “The ‘conservative’ culture of the district drove the data and my efforts to dismantle the conservatism led to the success of the district. Being an African American woman, I knew, would be the bulk of the challenge.”

Although they believe they were results-oriented, they recognized that their role as a woman and in particularly as an African American woman, did not allow their stakeholders the foresight to see their successful approaches until the success arrived.

The participants in this research looked at the issue of race, gender, and intersectionality as barriers to their effectiveness as superintendents. Their examples were clear in illustrating that many of their challenges could be attributed to this theme.
The African American Women Superintendents’ Final Perspectives

The participants were given the opportunity to assess their overall perspective as to why they believed their experiences could explain justifiably why African American women feel marginalized in their ability to have a presence as school district leader.

Superintendent Contrary. Superintendent Contrary as a triple threat to her standing as the chief administrator as she faces challenges concerning her credentials, her mannerism, and the face she represents for the district. Superintendent Contrary discussed her image as a black woman, the personal attacks, public scrutiny that marred her decision-making, and the impact that her alternative image reflected upon the role of a woman in traditional society.

I mean the treatment of African American women superintendents is absolutely deplorable sometimes. If you could be the fly on the wall on some of the things that we go through, you may not be shocked but you would be surprised. It’s micro-aggression after micro-aggression.

Superintendent Contrary presented in this final thought that she believed the image of what African American women reflected made her experiences indicative of reasons why some districts tend not to hire African American women as superintendents. She contended that society feared the strength of the African American woman.

Dr. Perfect. Like her pseudonym, Superintendent Dr. Perfect experienced success only through remaining feminine and soft-spoken in her actions. Being considered a well-received superintendent in the history of the school district, Dr. Perfect credited her experiences to accepting what was perceived as her place in leading the district. Servant leadership characterized the role Dr. Perfect played in handling district matters. Superintendent Dr. Perfect summarized her experiences by reflecting upon what she thought made her career challenging:
You will find, when talking to other African American women superintendents, we are always sent to “fixer-uppers” districts. Is it intentional? Yes. So in the South, you find boards who tend to follow along the demographic lines until they can’t. Because the community believed that only a minority leader could ‘fix’ their minority children. And since we have a historically made things work with little or nothing, limited or no resources should not hinder our job performance. But we all know it does.

Superintendent Dr. Perfect began by saying she was often judged by her level of nicety. She said, “I think women have to be careful about being overly aggressive especially in the South. Women are expected to be very feminine, not necessarily docile, but very soft-spoken.” Superintendent Dr. Perfect recognized that, even within a regional context, her role as superintendent had to be seen in a feminine manner, or the challenges surrounding it would become overwhelming.

Superintendent Contrary added to this perception when she discussed that she believed in her experiences: “Not only must women in chief leadership positions in schools must be competent, they must be likeable.” Superintendent Contrary pointed out that the importance of building relationships could significantly influence the length of a superintendent’s tenure, and added, “Of your stakeholder groups, in the best relationship, one of those groups is going to save you.” Superintendent Dr. Perfect provided specific narrative experiences to suggest that not only does the marginalization of African American women superintendents exists in recruitment and retention practices, but that the marginalization is intentional.

**Dr. Willing.** Superintendent Dr. Willing was often criticized for her feminist views on education and the role of women, mainly in the fact that she had a wide range of involvement both in education and in her community activism in support of improving education.
Superintendent Dr. Willing appears to love working with the educational leaders and other stakeholders of her district, but she struggled with the challenges that usurp the value of educating students. Dr. Willing summarized her experiences with the belief that, “Men are valued as strong leaders; women are devalued. Their strength halts their ability to be chosen as a school district leader as no one wants to work with the angry black woman.”

Although Superintendent Dr. Willing did not think having strength in her convictions makes her an angry individual, she thought that the servant nature of the role of superintendent gives women an added edge that men could not possess in their approach to leadership. She is angered that society does not see or buy-into the value-added trait that should increase the percentage of women, and African American women leading districts.

**Dr. Risk.** Dr. Risk takes risks that ultimately are successful, despite being an African American woman superintendent in an online district. Superintendent Dr. Risk talked about her experience as an African American woman when her presence was required for meetings. Serving in an online district, Dr. Risk spent most of her experience through digital communication. Superintendent Dr. Risk stated, “It was a big aha moment for me and I would say, ‘ok, I am the only person of color here,’ I am not uncomfortable with that but the others were.” Superintendent Dr. Risk stated that she was a very confident person and she did not allow her blackness to be misunderstood for angry. She also recalled a college experience where her pride began as a classmate told her to stay in her place concerning debating the role of race in Southern traditions.
Of all of the progressive leaders, Superintendent Dr. Risk was regarded as one of the most challenged of the participants because of her non-traditional setting in her role as superintendent. Her ability to illustrate her intelligence and capacity to lead is challenged by the fact that she leads an online district, so her success is assumed not to be attributed to her skills as an African American woman. In summary, she found that stakeholders, and in particular her school board still relegated her role to just being the help:

I think the overall issue with my board was the thought that a woman’s role was to be at home and they tried to project that and other subsequent beliefs onto media know my role as a woman, especially in my house. But this was not my house, this was my job.

Superintendent Dr. Risk’s critics, from her perspective, were always going to be governed by the male-dominant traditions of leadership that still contend she is not considered equal. Superintendent Dr. Risk’s success in the district is undeniable and proven as she has maintained a consistent success in increasing online attendance numbers that parallel increased district achievement, as measured by increased test scores.

**Dr. Justice.** Superintendent Dr. Justice was lauded by supporters and critics for different perspectives of the same attributes, garnering specific praise and recognition for her intelligence and bravery. Critics, according to Superintendent Dr. Justice, suggested that she was overly aggressive. Although she considers herself to be approachable, Superintendent Dr. Justice found her personality to be an asset, unlike the advice her colleagues gave her concerning their approach. Superintendent Dr. Justice indicated, “You have to always be prepared to answer for everything you do; If I wasn’t as strong as I was, I would not have made it.”
Dr. Justice was regarded as independent, intelligent, courageous, and headstrong. Her virtue as an experienced woman did not stop many critics from seeing her as underqualified. She summarized her experience as one that changed her in many ways.

I started this wanting to prove something, but that soon changed. I am still happy here because I am well-known in the state. I’m not bragging but not only did I learn what to do as superintendent, I also learned what not to do. I didn’t try to make strife, I wanted to lead, follow and later, get out of the way because I knew I would not be there forever, no matter how good I was.

Superintendent Dr. Justice served in the same district for 12 years and found a learning experience in how race governed her tenure and how she struggled to overcome the impact her race played in her experiences. Superintendent Dr. Justice discussed how she refused to allow herself to be placed inside of a box that would characterize her image as an African American women. Superintendent Dr. Justice described that she believed society dictated what people rise to, and the image of the African American woman could impact this.

**Dr. Determined.** Dr. Determined, presented the discussion about culture, as well as the continued image of women not being competent for the male-dominated society as they struggled to identify with their images as well. Superintendent Dr. Determined always understood that image of women as a minority was an underlying stereotype within her role. Dr. Determined discussed how she saw her experience as a superintendent as a struggle for defending her capacity to perform the task because she was a woman.

While a part of the new line of progressive superintendents, as shown by the experience along her career path, Dr. Determined had an immense impact on the growth of her district as a minority superintendent with a Caucasian population. Dr.
Determined’s critics judged her for her reliance on a culture that they did not understand in order to address the concerns of their culture. She later wrote a book summarizing some of her experiences leading to the superintendency that often manifested within her role as superintendent. She wrote,

> Overall, I am having a good ride, but it is partly due to knowing that my ascension came through a series of struggles because of being an African American woman. I knew that many of my experiences were about who I was and not what I could do. I turned that aggression into an attribute. It has worked so far.

**Dr. Competent.** Many critics of woman in leadership frame their belief that women were invading a man’s territory and had to be conquered by marginalizing their presence in the roles. Superintendent Dr. Competent mocked this theory in a haughty tone when she stated, “Social justice reform appropriates contemporary social issues of feminism and human freedom” in order to make racial domination less intrusive in her district. Her laugh after the remark suggested that she knew her response was cynical to the idea that if women were strong in their presence as leaders, issues concerning race and gender would be minimized during her tenure.

Superintendent Dr. Competent noted that because she was about to retire, she was going to express freely that she was intentional in her responses to the issues as they arose. Despite social issues arising about every four years, Dr. Competent was considered role model to help people understand why society should respect women in leadership. Superintendent Dr. Competent was the first and only superintendent specifically to express her desire not to continue her working relationships at the conclusion of her tenure.

Comparably, Superintendent Dr. Competent considered herself a role model to help other African American women who effectively were leading a school district.
Superintendent Dr. Competent was confident in her belief that she helped stakeholders to understand that at the end of the work experience, the main role of a superintendent is to educate children. She stated,

I got wind of the Dallas Dance situation and I heard that Barbara Byrd Bennett went to jail. So for me, I knew that after 44 years, my retirement was necessary because I was leaving a legacy; the last thing I wanted was to leave this district worse than when I met it because I didn’t want it to be said that this black woman came here and the district went down.

**Superintendent Militant.** Superintendent Militant was considered a role model who could help find the warrior within the individual. Through perseverance, Superintendent Militant became a great warrior because of courage, intelligence, and determination that guided her actions in support of the teachers and students of the county. She credited this with her overwhelming success as a voter-elected county superintendent. Even when a senator pledged to destroy her career, Superintendent Militant was able to rally her support that the senator could not match.

Superintendent Militant pointed out that she could pull the race card on many of her negative situations, but she did not because the attacks seemed more about her beliefs concerning traditions than about her race. Superintendent Militant discussed that when the senator began her campaign to limit the authority of the county superintendents, it was about Superintendent Militant wanting to close a school that had supposed historic value to the community. According to Superintendent Militant, the fight was about the best way to educate children, not her race. The school did not close but the personal attack and public scrutiny continued. Superintendent Militant countered this issue by pointing out, “I deal with those who do not like me.” Superintendent Militant summarized her overall experience with those relationships built to support her actions,
contending, “You motivate the people to trust you by validation of their belief systems, purpose in your actions, direction in your leadership; when you do that, your vision becomes their vision and you have built a relationship of trust.” Superintendent Militant indicated that she would continue to succeed and that her experiences ultimately would help society to stop marginalizing the presence of women in the educational leadership role of superintendent.

**Dr. Tenacious.** Dr. Tenacious is a hardworking, ambitious, and beautiful young woman who simply desired to achieve her goal of being a successful superintendent. Inspired by the accomplishments of a family of educators, Superintendent Dr. Tenacious discussed what her goal of being a successful superintendent meant as a change for her in that perspective. One of the themes derived from the data of this research focused upon the impact of balancing work and family life on the role of superintendents. Superintendent Dr. Tenacious drew criticism if her independence came across as being too business like and not having a personal life outside of the educational arena. Superintendent Dr. Tenacious stated,

> Many of my colleagues at first thought I was ‘too haughty’ or ‘too much about business’ to be an effective superintendent. They thought I should ‘get a life’ and some were audacious enough to say so; albeit under their breath (laughs). But then I started to see it myself. I told myself to get a life.

**Superintendent Dedicated.** Superintendent Dedicated was entangled in the fiber of her district as she became the superintendent through the desire of the board of the district to grow their own. Acquiring the position because she was second in line after the termination of her predecessor, Superintendent Dedicated was first given the role in an interim position that, although it did not immediately become permanent, illustrated that the district did not wish to seek an outside candidate as their superintendent. A leader
with a long history of supporting the district, her position was seen as a natural progression to leadership. Superintendent Dedicated was praised for a spirited personality and contemporaneity, characterizing her ability to jump into new adventures. Superintendent Dedicated summarized her experience so far by reflecting upon her progression, the initial stagnation and its impact on her presence:

If you ask me on some days, I would say I am at the point where I am done, but then some days I have something still pulling me here. I believe it is because I deserve to be here. I took the bumps and bruises. I paid my dues, I hit a brick wall and I burst through it. Now I am where I think I should be.

**Dr. Loyal.** Dr. Loyal was the only superintendent whose belief initially suggested that she did not believe race and gender were primary factors in her challenges. Dr. Loyal discussed her competency for the position and expressed that being an African American woman was just by happenstance. Dr. Loyal contended, “I think people just see ‘me,’ constantly quoted in the newspaper, being out there, holding my own. I take that very seriously.”

Superintendent Dr. Loyal credited this belief on the idea that her board members wanted better curricula programs and she had curricula-laden experiences. She found herself unintentionally a spokesman for diversity and the acceptance of African Americans, specifically African American women in various caucuses. The fact that she was an African American woman superintendent was not a characterization she ascribed to willingly but found herself stuck with it, and she indicated that she made it work for her. Superintendent Dr. Loyal discussed how the board was in opposition to one another to the extent that her position was approved because each member was expecting the other member to deny the recommendation. She said, “I think the Jews thought the
Catholics would not put me in so they depended on the other side to say ‘no’; I ended up with a 5-0 vote.”

Superintendent Dr. Loyal stated that as her board configuration changed and she not only realized her race was a factor and accepted it, she had to put it out there to her board to get over it and move on to the business of educating children. She said, “Once I told them this, I was done with it. I had a job to do. And I was going to do it, while they struggled with who I was.” The struggle with Superintendent Dr. Loyal as an African American woman, from her overall perspective, often divided and caused friction among the factions. Superintendent Dr. Loyal controlled her destiny by honing her skills in curriculum and increasing the propensity for students to succeed beyond K-12 education.

Superintendent Dr. Loyal also later point out that she understood why many African American women superintendents believed that there were many challenges that attempted to devalue the role of superintendent as she discussed her relationship with other superintendents. Dr. Loyal shared,

I knew Superintendent Contrary when she was in the state. Superintendent Contrary was an outstanding visionary who was unfairly given a vote of ‘no-confidence’ in another district because she was being perceived as too offensive and subsequently ‘too black’.

The example that Superintendent Dr. Loyal pointed out concerned how board members explained Superintendent Contrary’s actions were unapproachable to the level of haughtiness and too outspoken. Superintendent Dr. Loyal contended that Superintendent Contrary was always in control of things and that this was perceived by colleagues as being too masculine. Superintendents in the study all knew too well that being masculine did not improve the societal belief about the role of the superintendent.
In fact, two of the superintendents indicated that it did more damage to their perception and had a negative impact on their experiences.

**Summary**

Each of the participants in this research study shared their personal experiences during their role as an African American woman superintendent. Located in different parts of the United States, the superintendents did not have distinct differences in their responses. Six of the superintendents provided leadership in Southeastern school districts, one serves in Southwestern United States, one served in Northeastern United States, and the remaining four served in the Northern portion of the Midwestern region. The superintendents discussed how they initially enjoyed the benefits of their positions; if there was a change in the perspectives of their boards concerning hiring them based on their initial successes, each participant shared what they perceived as the shift in the board’s perspective or what event changed their relationship. The superintendents in this study surmised that their leadership was, from the onset, in their perception, based upon external factors about what a superintendent should represent in terms of their beliefs.

Much of disaggregated data analyzed in the leadership self-assessment survey suggest that each of the superintendents perceived that they are competent and equipped to perform the tasks associated with being a school district superintendent. The superintendents perceived that they exemplified components of effective leadership. Most of the superintendents credited any deficiency to their skillset as the perception of society and people’s reaction to them as African American women superintendents.

The interviews yielded another set of data that discussed the experiences of the participants in the study. Four of the superintendents specifically began with the notion of
the role of women and its impact on their experiences. Additional responses given by the other participants suggested that the role of women and their expected social norms and behaviors are challenged as African American women superintendents spend their tenure in school districts. Of the remaining participants, another superintendent conceded later in the interview that ‘maybe’ some of the stakeholders held her gender in consideration when responding to her actions or behaviors.

Being in the public eye has the propensity for the superintendents to defend their decisions and their behaviors. The participants agree that they are faced with multiple challenges under public scrutiny and that it is their responses that illustrate their ability to be resilient and overcome the challenges.

Eleven of the superintendents that participated in this research discussed that some of their experiences can be framed around being a woman and in particular, a woman of color. Participants found themselves recalling external factors like race and gender that characterized their experiences.

Participants in the interviews also agree that African American women superintendents struggle with a double litmus test of being African American and women in their role. This double negative (as they suggest they are perceived) stratifies their position and relegates their acquisition of a superintendent position to the lowest potential. Varying responses provided a unique perspective of how each of the superintendents saw their blackness. All but three specifically used the term ‘angry black woman’ to describe some people’s reaction to decisions they made as superintendents.

The African American women superintendents who participated in this study reported that they perceived their jobs as being temporary and not for extended tenure. In
fact, many of them indicated that the average tenure was from three to five years (serving at maximum two contracts) but that contracts longer than that can happen only if the influential stakeholders fight for the superintendent to stay.

The African American women superintendents who participated in this study determined their overall satisfaction with the job in terms of the impact on their perspective districts. Three of the superintendents spoke of advancing social change, increasing the equal opportunity for students. The participants viewed their work as advocating for children and their families in educating them.

Through the superintendents’ narratives described in this chapter, discussions in Chapter Five show the relationship to earlier theories presented. The participants’ narratives shared experiences that included either issues of race (ethnocentrism), gender (androcentrism) and/or a culmination of the two variables (intersectionality) that stagnated their career trajectory. All theories illuminate the participants’ perceptions as to why they believe that their role as superintendent often was marginalized.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Summary of the Study

African American women are marginalized in their opportunities and experiences as school district superintendents. Although the candidate pool of African American women vying for the superintendent position has increased, the number of candidates to acquire the position successfully remains low. Although there are over 13,000 school districts in the United States, less than 25% of those school systems were being led by a woman (Superville, 2016, p. 10). Moreover, less than 2% of the women leaders were African American women (NABSE, 2017). As of January 2018, there were only 106 African American women superintendents among an increased superintendent population of 14,000 which reflects an actual decline from 2011 when it was represented in research that there were 245 African American women superintendents (NABSE, 2011). The position of school district superintendent is a predominantly white male position. As reflective of their small population, very little research explores the experiences of African American women superintendents as they hold the position as chief administrators of school districts (Alston, 2005). Alston (2005) also wrote that the limited number of African Americans obtaining the position gave the impression that their lack of presence was due to their inability to do the job.

The primary purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of African American women superintendents in the United States who served as a school district superintendent to determine if their experiences illustrated that there was an intentional marginalization of African American women as school district superintendents.
**Marginalization: An overall summation.** The intentional marginalization of African American women as school district superintendents limit their ability to acquire and successfully maintain the leadership position. The research study used the responses by the participants to validate if the claim of marginalization had merit. The study protocol required the participants initially to self-assess their leadership capacity through the use of a Likert-style leadership survey intended to judge their own perception of their ability to lead a school district. The study also asked the participants to respond to interview questions about their experiences as a superintendent. The interview questions were open-ended and allowed the superintendents to give narrative examples that illustrated their perspectives on whether or not they are experiencing challenges that were specifically related to any variables that exist to aid in their marginalization as African American women superintendents. Themes derived from the data spoke to the experiences of the 11 final participants. Each of the superintendents spoke of their perspective on why they concluded that African American women were marginalized as superintendents after earning the role due to: (a) the ability of the superintendent to hold the position; (b) the need for leading a balanced life while holding the position; (c) the belief that their experiences were in response to societal perception of the traditional role of women; (d) their belief that their image as an African American woman often led to public scrutiny and personal attacks; and (e) their belief that race, gender, and intersectionality characterized their experiences. The participants’ shared experiences emerged as themes found in the coding process.

Nine of the 11 superintendents experienced traditional advancement to the superintendency, having moved through the ranks, from teacher, to principal, to district
administrator, and finally to superintendent. Eight of the 11 superintendents had a doctoral degree.

**Discussion of Findings**

As this research intended to refer specifically to the experiences of those participants in the study and were not intended to generalize the role and experience of all African American women superintendents, themes generated in this study are the result of the shared commonalities in their responses to the interview questions as they discussed their experiences in their roles as African American women superintendents. A summary table was developed to illustrate the participants responses in relationship to the themes generated that will highlight if responses by participants provided support for the themes that were established.

*Summary Matrix of Participants’ Response in Relationship to Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>Theme #1</th>
<th>Theme #2</th>
<th>Theme #3</th>
<th>Theme #4</th>
<th>Theme #5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>P 4: Risk</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>P 8: Militant</td>
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<td>P 9: Tenacious</td>
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<tr>
<td>P 10: Dedicated</td>
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</table>
The researcher also sought to determine if the experiences were interconnected enough to illustrate marginalization of African American women in the role of school district superintendent. It was this marginalization that was considered the major factor that accounted for a lack of presence of the African American woman in the position of superintendent in school districts.

Through analysis of a leadership self-assessment survey instrument and responses given in a series of interviews, themes emerged that supported the claim of marginalization in the recruitment and retention of African American women as school district superintendents. It was also important to note that, although, at times, there were distinct differences in their responses, there was an overall consensus in many aspects of the participants’ experiences that made a connection between the superintendents. Each participant also shared the sentiment that the lack of African American women representation as superintendent could be attributed to marginalization by the school boards responsible for hiring the potential superintendent.

**Discussion of findings in relationship to theoretical framework.** The participants shared narratives that exposed their feelings about: (1) the perception by their stakeholders in their ability to hold the position as superintendents; (2) their reactions to public scrutiny and personal attacks in relationship to their perception of the image of an African American woman; (3) response to criticism that debate the role of superintendent to the traditional views of the role of women, and; (4) their reaction to role that race, gender, and intersectionality play in the experiences and their reactions to the importance
of balancing work and family life. Analysis reflects that these themes accounted for reasons why African American women believed they were as superintendent.

**Findings of intersectionality.** Intersectionality is a theory that looks at the interconnected nature of variables like race and gender and explores the discrimination or disadvantage generated by the interconnection. This disadvantage can suppress the success of individuals. This theory was identified within the final themes as the discussion of the image of the African American woman was aligned with the public scrutiny and personal attack stories the participants shared. From the natural way some of the participants did or did not wear their hair to the lack of marital partners, the narratives revealed how being Black and a Woman influenced their role in the leadership position of superintendent. Alston (2018) indicated that African American women superintendents often are reminded that they have to run as fast as they can for as long as they can to remain in front of the drama.

Participants discussed their experiences in reference to intersectionality, serving as a hindrance when they were seeking support in their decision-making. They indicated that, at times, much of the board support was a reflection of members’ emotional and personal belief systems about women, and specifically their belief about women of color. Participants shared that their board members’ belief systems sometimes, overrode well, sound decisions when, for example, approving superintendent recommendations. Researchers who explored intersectionality shared this belief system as evidence in their studies. Crenshaw (1989) consistently provided research that shared this sentiment. She explained that with African American women, it is easy to understand how dominant
beliefs of discrimination encourage people to think about subordination as disadvantage existing along a single categorical axis.

Crenshaw (1989) suggested that the limitation in research inquiry to only explore race or gender individually helped in the marginalization of the African American women superintendents and their experiences. Crenshaw’s also suggested that the failure to have more research inquiry into both race and gender would seem to explain why research concerning superintendents would leave out the African American women superintendents’ experiences.

The concepts of androcentrism and ethnocentrism were also evident in the interviews as the participants discussed their role as women superintendents against a society that consistently has been considered a white, male-dominated position. Their narratives gave individual perspectives on race (ethnocentrism) and gender (androcentrism) as it influenced their experiences. This becomes important in explaining how the intersectionality of race and gender created combined oppressive experiences for the superintendents. While androcentrism explored the societal perception that males are superior to women, making women incapable of being successful in certain professions, ethnocentrism extended the societal perception that whites are considered the dominant culture, making African Americans were not capable as well of success in holding certain professions. When the participants discussed their roles and experiences in relationship to men, and in particular white men, many determined that biases against them were evident because African American women had both race and gender that served as a double concern while holding the superintendent position.
According to Brunner (2003), relative to its representative nature, it can be surmised that without a doubt, the superintendency is populated and controlled by white men. In national studies with aggregate findings from representative samples, the responses of white men dominate the conclusions so heavily that the responses of women and women of color are nonexistent (AASA, 2014). At least four of the superintendents in this study found it difficult to share an experience without the underlying message of androcentric or ethnocentric biases present. Their responses provided evidence of the intentional marginalization based upon intersectionality.

Additionally, the idea of marginalization of African American women superintendents included a look at a double whammy concept against the African American woman. As explained earlier in the research, the double whammy effect is the perception by which intersectionality influences the experiences of African American women who are experiencing the issues of both racism and genderism. This double whammy effect would be exasperated by stereotyping the African American women image as black women who society felt that could not serve sufficiently in leadership roles because they were always considered to be angry. In fact, Harris-Perry (2011) explained that this was one of the common stereotypes black women in modern society face, “In general, many people expect to meet black women who always seem to be angry about some aspect of their life. If only the upside of the angry black female stereotype was powerful enough to overcome the hostilities and biases associated with its meaning, women in top leadership positions would not be so few” (p. 222).

Harris-Perry (2011), as well as the participants of this research study, contended that being perceived as an angry black woman is blamed for the marginalization of the
African American in the role of superintendent and is also used as an excuse to scrutinize their decisions and actions. The image of African American women, as discussed by the participants, was always placed against the premise that they were innately angry and that anger guided their decisions.

Many of the participants also discussed how it was the expectation of the African American women superintendents to disengage in the stereotypes that became synonymous with the image of being angry (i.e. facial and hand gestures) while facing the challenges of the district. Participants also discussed how the stereotypical images often made African American women superintendents become the messiahs or scapegoats of the rise or fall of the school districts. Hill and Ragland (1995) explained that African American women, especially in large urban districts, often were expected to enter into school districts that had some type of problem, such as a high attrition rate among teachers, a high discipline rate or a low achievement rate among students, and eliminate or reduce the problem area. Unfortunately, those African American women who were successful in their experiences still sometimes lost their jobs (Hill & Ragland, 1995).

Specific examples provided by the participants support the belief that the loss of the job was intentional to justify further the marginalization because it supported the claim that African American women superintendents were incapable of holding the job. Björk and Rodgers (1999) suggested in their research that school board members who recruited minority superintendents “set unrealistic goals and expected them to have immaculate perception and find miraculous solutions to intractable problems” (p. 6). This would also be significant to the idea of supporting the claim of African American women
being incapable of holding the job as they cannot overcome the challenges of the position.

Past African American women superintendents’ experiences with this issue were so overlooked that it generated stereotypes that suggested that African American women superintendents were too emotional for the position (Bjork, 1999). Wanting to overcome the negative stereotypes, the participants also discussed how they were sometimes innately forced to code-switch. Participants also shared the belief that African American women superintendents found themselves sometimes code-switching to cover for the image society had of African American women. Research explored the concept of code-switching as a part of the identity process necessary for acceptance into mainstream cultures.

**Aspiring Superintendents.** As the purpose this research was to explore the experiences of African American women superintendents and to discuss, if any, the challenges in their experiences and how those challenges impacted their leadership, it becomes necessary to provide guidance for aspiring superintendents. It is important to recognize that the scope of the superintendent position can vary by state, by county and by district. The fact that there is no national preparation program or specified test required, the position becomes one whose role changes from district to district. This makes the position more susceptible to being politically and financially influenced.

Superintendents aspiring to the role of district leader are advised to go into the position understanding the political, social, and economic outlook of the area they will represent. Superintendents are advised to understanding the board influence on the community as well as the key stakeholders in the system. They should always be
transparency in the shared decision-making process and a respect for collaborative work. Finally, aspiring superintendents should govern their actions with integrity and strength.

The position can be challenging, but the results of a successful district worthy of the challenge.

**Conclusion**

The participants in this study came from very diverse backgrounds. They held advanced degrees and have experiences that put their careers on track to becoming quality candidates for superintendents. Participants in this research study provided information to support the claim that the lack of African American women superintendents in the leadership position was marginalization. Participants’ perceptions led to a conclusion of their lack of presence could be attributed to five major themes. These themes, when aligned with the theoretical premises presented in Chapter 1, illustrated that African American women superintendents, although viable candidates, experiencing significantly challenging roles when they were given the chance to serve based on race and gender.

The participants spoke of how their work challenges included serving as the scapegoat for an already challenging and negative scenario in their designated school system that tarnished the image of the superintendent, which further justified the marginalization. Each of the participants shared career-related experiences that supported their ability to perform the task of superintendent. Many spoke of the lengthy time that it took for them to acquire the position, while others spoke of how their positions were defaulted by mitigating factors like limited candidates applying for the next in line position. All but one superintendent initially shared the belief that their status as African
American women influenced their experience in more than one way. As the interviews progressed, the remaining superintendent shared that she was felt attacked only once in a certain decision because she was an African American woman.

The participants discussed how biases against women superintendents was doubled, and in some cases, tripled against the African American women superintendents, making their experiences more challenging.

African American women superintendents also required ‘more experience’ at middle management levels in education. Participants even shared that many candidates they served with as colleagues chose retirement rather than the superintendency because it took too long to acquire the position.

**Leadership Assessment.** The leadership self-assessment provided insight into the expectations of a superintendent through the creation of the Likert-scale descriptors within the survey. As a school superintendent, it is important that educational leadership practices illustrate the superintendent’s ability to implement strategies for meeting district strategic goals. This includes setting the district vision and establishing clear goals. Superintendents have to be able to provide direction for action research plans to ensure programs and improvements achieve the goal and encourage others to contribute to goal(s) achievement. There was an intrinsic responsibility to secure commitments to a course of action from various stakeholder groups.

Superintendents are expected to encourage team goals. They are expected to model behaviors to ensure group’s movement to goal completion and celebration of group accomplishments. Educational leadership programs also train superintendents to be able to perceive the needs and concerns of others, while dealing tactfully with conflict.
and emotionally stressful situations. Their leadership style should reflect knowledge of what information to communicate and to whom. Lastly, it is important to know how to appropriately relate to people of varying ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

Superintendents must be able to communicate when speaking to individuals, small groups and large groups. They are expected to make oral presentations to school boards and other stakeholder communities that are clear and easy to understand. The organizational skills of the superintendent encompass more than keeping the staff focused on the vision and the mission. Effective superintendents plan their own work and the work of others so that resources are used appropriately; they establish procedures for completing tasks and they monitor the time and task management of a goal. Successfully organized superintendents know what tasks to delegate and to whom to delegate the appropriate task.

Superintendents must be able to reach logical conclusions and make high quality decisions based on available information. They must be able to prioritize significant issues and exercise appropriate caution in making decisions. When making decisions, they must seek out relevant data and facts; and they must analyze and interpret complex information before taking action. Most importantly, superintendents must assume responsibility and recognize when a unilateral decision was to be made by taking prompt action when urgent issues emerge. These expectations were to be done in effort to resolve short-term issues as they balance against long-term objectives.

As the chief leader of a school system, leading, encouraging, and helping others are the paramount traits that a superintendent must exhibit because the superintendents often provide specific feedback based upon observations and data. Understanding
personal strengths and weaknesses of faculty and the staff allows for superintendents to communicate effectively with individuals in a professional manner, often with the expectation that the feedback is without bias or influences that can often be seen as negative.

Superintendents often find their role can be a continuous learning curve. Superintendents have to ensure that they are not seen through biases and stereotypes that significantly can impact their experiences. The superintendents’ experiences should not suggest that their marginalization is based upon any variable that is not aligned to their capacity to fulfill the position. As such, superintendents must be able to take responsibility for their professional improvement by actively pursuing developmental activities that strengthen their perceived role in the leadership position.

**Implications**

This research study was performed to add to the limited research base that discussed the experiences of African American women superintendents while serving in their leadership capacity. Findings support the contention that African American women superintendents, because of their limited presence in the role of superintendent, were marginalized and afforded far less opportunity to serve in the leadership position. Findings emphasize the significance of race, gender and intersectionality as it relates to the marginalization. In cases where districts were largely urban and suburban, the respondents also pointed out that the implications of the lack of their presence made their limited experiences one that often had significant challenges that other racial and gender groups did not experience.
Immigrate (1988) suggested that research on the experiences of African American women superintendents was so limited, that the experiences shared by the participants in this study provided new insight into the significance of sharing their experiences in effort to prepare aspiring superintendents for the context in which they could serve. Implications of this research may impact school board practices in defining expectations for superintendents that are fair and measurable. The discriminatory practices that were discussed through this research suggested a need for more research to explain how to eradicate the practices. More research is also suggested in the area of combined racial and gender equity practices concerning women of color and how their challenges influence their leadership roles.

Study participants continuously made reference to receiving support initially from the stakeholders; but they also recognized the moment at which the image as an African American woman began to impact their experiences. On superintendent discussed how she saw the shift at the first instance she angered a colleague. She contended that in making decisions that people would not like, the superintendent began to notice that board members began questioning the decision. Another superintendent discussed how a board member called a decision emotionally-laden and would frequently refer to the decision when inquiring about other decisions being made. The implication is the recognition the shift in perceptions that changed the experiences. It was at points where biases concerning androcentric (male-centered) views and ethnocentric (race-centered) views became the underlying issue in the perceptions held. Many times those issues called for the participants to have to prove their worthiness as the leader in making the decisions for the district. One superintendent spoke of the collegial sisterhood that did not
provide enough support to offset the vote of no-confidence her colleague received.

Another superintendent indicated that her connections did not help her in the acquisition of her certification when she was one course short of requirements, even when a male counterpart having the same issue was granted a waiver for his certification.

African American women superintendents that participated in this research had great expertise; the majority of them had exceeded the average tenure of the position. They focus on important aspects of the district and were held accountable, either voluntarily or through public scrutiny, for their actions or behaviors. The information provided in the interviews provided insight into the challenges that create barriers to the increase in the number of superintendents. These superintendents would come to find that the role of the superintendency had barriers that they needed to recognize and ways to overcome the barriers needed to be considered.

**Subjectivity Statement.** To ensure the accuracy of my findings, I engaged in fact checking not only the transcribed notes, but I also asked the participants to ensure that the transcription was correct. I asked some participants to clarify any misunderstood information and I made corrections when necessary.

The irony of my experience in writing the dissertation came on May 5, 2018 when I was selected to serve as the new superintendent of St. David Unified School District #21 in St. David, AZ. I am one of three African American superintendents in the state of Arizona and one of three African Americans of any gender in the state. A small rural district, I am the first African American woman superintendent in the history of the district. My student population is over 99% Caucasian (there are two African American students). The faculty and staff population is over 99% Caucasian as well as there are two
African American employees under my authority. Majority of the families are practicing Mormons and are middle class in socio-economic status.

In my current experience, my stakeholders are very supportive. The issue of race has not surfaced in board activity and the members of the board support my proposals and typically rely upon my decision and unilaterally allow me to make the final decisions. I exhibit very diverse traits (i.e. my hair is natural and worn in natural styles, I wear dashikis and accessorize with ethnic jewelry) and my district welcomes the look. Many times I am asked questions about my diversity perspective and find that the questions are genuinely inquisitive as opposed to condescending.

My experience as an African American woman superintendent stands in contradiction to many of the findings of my research. This creates a sense of reliability on the idea that I reported the findings despite my clear differentiation on the experience. In the dissertation, I indicated that the findings were not intended to speak for all African American women superintendents, but the experiences that I am currently experiencing illustrates my ability to remain unbiased in presenting the findings.

It is here where I feel it is important to indicate that my biggest supporter is the president of the school board who is, in all likelihood, could be classified as a WASP in terms of cultural identity. He is a strong male, but he clearly does not mind my leadership skills and personality. He concedes to my knowledge and often tells other board members to allow me to lead the district without challenge. Another board member invites me to her organizational affiliations and has introduced me to the Governor of Arizona, several state senators and prominent politicians, who often remember me when seen in other locations. Many of them have become supporters of my work as well and became
steadfast in supporting my goal to complete my doctoral degree through consistently keeping in touch with my progress.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This research was based upon personal experiences through interviews and surveys of sitting superintendents. Literature in the scholarly world was very limited on the premise of my study because the research illustrated studies of race or gender. The research never addressed intersectionality in efforts to show any marginalization of a specific group of people. Consequently, many of the ideas presented limited empirical and statistical evidence supporting the research question. As the research presented by the African American women superintendents can be considered valid, it explains how the superintendents perceived their experiences and discussed the impact of race and gender on their tenure as superintendent. Additional topics for future study can include the following:

1. A research study on the challenges and barriers that African American women superintendents face in comparison to barriers other minority groups face as superintendents.
2. A repetition of research study that includes an increased number of African American women superintendents in more diverse settings.
3. A research study that discusses the career trajectory of African American women superintendents in comparison to other minority groups.
4. A research study that compares the relationship of African American women superintendents with their school board and other minority superintendents and their relationship with school board members.
5. A research study of the success/failure experiences of African American women superintendents in comparison to their other leadership roles (e.g., Director, Supervisor, etc.).
References


Alston, J. (2018). Skype interview. February


Boykin, W., & Noguera, P. (2011). *Creating the opportunity to learn: Moving from research to practice to close the achievement gap*. Washington, DC: ASCD.


_Dissertation Abstracts International, 32_, 2965A.


Self-Assessment Survey Instrument

Participant’s Name__________________________________________
Date_______________

**Instructions:** Reflect upon your leadership behavior and practice as it relates to the skill dimension and its definition. Read each behavioral statement below the definition and assign a rating that best describes your behavior. Be honest with yourself. This self-assessment is intended to create a narrative profile on each participant.

### EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

**Leadership Direction:** Implementing strategies for meeting district strategic goals, including setting the district vision and establishing clear goals; providing direction for action research plans to ensure program(s) and improvements achieves the goal; encouraging others to contribute to goal(s) achievement and securing commitment to a course of action from individuals and groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement of Skill Dimension</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I articulate a clear vision for the district and ensure that staff can articulate the vision when asked.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>I set high performance expectations (with set measurable objectives) for myself and generate enthusiasm for others to accomplish the common goals.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>I encourage innovation and articulate the performance expectations for district and school-based staff.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>I seek the commitment of all stakeholders to a strategic plan for academic success.</td>
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5. I develop alliances and resources outside of the district to improve the quality of educational services provided for the district.

**Team Goal Setting:** Encouraging team goals; modeling behaviors to ensure group’s movement to goal completion; supporting group accomplishments.

1-Never  2-Rarely  3-Occasionally  4-Frequently  5-Almost Always  NA-not applicable

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement of Skill Dimension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I support the ideas and views offered by district staff when making decisions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I encourage all staff (school-based and district-based) to share their vision for district programmatic initiatives.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>I assist in the operational tasks of the district and schools.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>I seek to develop consensus in goal-setting practices.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>I assist the team in maintaining direction needed to complete tasks.</td>
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**Sensitivity:** Perceiving the needs and concerns of others; dealing tactfully with others in conflict and emotionally stressful situations; knowing what information to communicate and to whom; appropriately relating to people of varying ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

1-Never  2-Rarely  3-Occasionally  4-Frequently  5-Almost Always  NA-not applicable

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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement of Skill Dimension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I interact appropriately and tactfully with people from different backgrounds.</td>
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</table>
2. I elicit perceptions, feelings and concerns of others.

3. I communicate necessary information to the appropriate persons in a timely manner.

4. I take action to divert unnecessary conflict.

5. I express verbal and non-verbal recognition of feelings, needs and concerns of others.

---

**COMMUNICATION**

**Oral Communication:** Clearly communicating when speaking to individuals, small groups and large groups; making oral presentations that are clear and easy to understand.

1-Never  2-Rarely  3-Occasionally  4-Frequently  5-Almost Always  NA-not applicable

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement of Skill Dimension</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>I demonstrate effective presentation skill, e.g., opening and closing comments, eye contact, enthusiasm, rapport and confidence.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>I tailor messages to meet the needs of each unique audience.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>I clearly present thoughts and ideas in one-on-one, small group and large group conversations.</td>
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**ORGANIZATION**

**Organizational Skills:** Planning one’s own work and the work of others so that resources are used appropriately; establishing procedures and monitoring time and task management. Knowing what to delegate and to whom.

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement of Skill Dimension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I delegate responsibilities to others.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>I monitor the progress and completion of delegated responsibilities.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>I develop action plans to achieve district strategic goals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I monitor progress and modify action plans as needed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I establish timelines, schedules and milestones.</td>
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**RESOLVING COMPLEX PROBLEMS**

**Judgement:** Reaching logical conclusions and making high quality decisions based on available information; assigning priority to significant issues, exercising appropriate caution in making decisions; seeking out relevant data and facts; analyzing and interpreting complex information before taking action.

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166
1. I assign priority to issues and tasks within the district’s vision.

2. I communicate a clear learning-related rationale for each district decision.

3. I use relevant sources for data and information to confirm or refute assumptions.

4. I seek to identify the cause(s) of a problem.

5. I evaluate information to determine the elements of a decision.

**Results-Oriented:** Assuming responsibility; recognizing when a decision is required; taking prompt action when issues emerge; resolving short-term issues while balancing long-term objectives.

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<tr>
<th>1-Never</th>
<th>2-Rarely</th>
<th>3-Occasionally</th>
<th>4-Frequently</th>
<th>5-Almost Always</th>
<th>NA-not applicable</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Statement of Skill Dimension</td>
<td>Rating</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I take action to move issues towards closure in a timely manner.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I take responsibility for implementing district initiatives.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>I determine the criteria for which a problem or issue is resolved.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>I consider the long-term and short-term implications of a decision.</td>
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</table>
5. I see the big picture related to the district’s mission and vision.

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**DEVELOPING SELF AND OTHERS**

**Development of Others:** Leading, encouraging and helping others; providing specific feedback based upon observations and data.

1-Never 2-Rarely 3-Occasionally 4-Frequently 5-Almost Always NA-not applicable

<table>
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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement of Skill Dimension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I share information and expertise from my professional experiences to assist the professional growth of others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I motivate others to change behaviors that inhibit professional growth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I ask a protégé what he/she perceives to be strengths and weaknesses and what he/she wants to improve.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>I give behaviorally specific feedback, focused on the behavior, not the person.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>I suggest development activities to improve others’ professional capacity.</td>
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**Understanding Own Strength and Weaknesses:** Understanding personal strengths and weaknesses; taking responsibility for improvement by actively pursuing developmental activities.

1-Never 2-Rarely 3-Occasionally 4-Frequently 5-Almost Always NA-not applicable
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement of Skill Dimension</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I recognize and appropriately communicate my own strengths.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I recognize and manage my own developmental needs.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I actively pursue personal growth through participation in planned developmental activities.</td>
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**Please Note:** This Self-Assessment is a modification of the Breaking Ranks 21st Century School Leadership Skills developed by NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals) with permission to do so by attached approval form.

APPENDIX B

Interview Survey Instrument

As a part of this research project, I would like to make a narrative profile explaining your views of the research. In order to do so, I would like for you to answer the following questions about yourself. In any use of this information, your name would not be identified. The researcher will use a pseudonym for the final narrative analysis. Your completion of this information will help support the credibility of the research.

Professional Education (Superintendent Preparation Program(s))

1. Please introduce yourself; provide information on your preparation for educational leadership.

   Background Experience (Pathway to Superintendency)

1. How long have you served in an educational position? Why did you choose to be an educator?

2. Describe your career trajectory leading to the position of Superintendent. (Describe the positions held leading to the position you currently hold)

Professional Experience(s) (Superintendent Tenure)

1. How would you describe your overall experience as a superintendent?

2. What do you consider to be your leadership style?

3. What is your philosophy of leadership?

4. Describe your interaction with stakeholders in the community? How do ensure diversity in leadership practices?

5. Explain your involvement in the professional learning community and how you use data to promote academic achievement.