

AN EXAMINATION OF BLACK WOMEN LEADERS' EDUCATIONAL AND  
PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES ON THE PATH TOWARD  
THE SUPERINTENDENCY

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

While many studies have considered the preparation, recruitment, ascension, mentoring and retention of Black women in the superintendency, this qualitative dissertation examined the educational and professional experiences of a former, as well as practicing and aspiring superintendents. This research employed a bricolage of methods, inclusive of qualitative interviewing, ethnomethodology and autoethnography. Participants in the study included five Black women: one former superintendent, one current superintendent and three aspiring superintendents, including myself. The five participants in the study detailed their perspectives of how their race and gender, and in some cases, how the intersection of their racial and gendered identities informed their educational and professional experiences while in the position and on the pathway to the public school superintendency. The following themes were derived from the study: (a) Perceptions of identity and identities: motivators and inhibitors; (b) Non-traditional and non-linear educational and career pathways; and (c) Experience of difference: diversity, struggle and activism.

With the racial and gender demographics in education and educational leadership being disproportionate to the number of Black women superintendents, issues of equity in opportunities, career preparation, and advancement and leadership practice are of interest and importance to practitioners, policy makers, and researchers. This study examined how Black women leaders' race and gender informed their educational and professional

experiences on the superintendency career pathway, so that the superintendency within a leadership context has additional perspectives, distinct from the past perspectives of White males, who have occupied the position of public school superintendent.

## **I. INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT, AND BACKGROUND**

The superintendent holds the pinnacle position of leadership, power, and influence in the United States' public school districts. Research indicated that more men than women have ascended to and occupied the superintendency (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Historically, men had traditionally held more teaching and leadership roles than women in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Women received limited formal education, so they were not prepared to teach others and minorities were not considered at all for teaching. As opportunities for men increased in the area of school administration and the superintendency, men began leaving *the teaching* to women (Blount, 2003). According to Kowalski and Brunner (2005), Blount (1998), Jackson (1999), and Day (2007) early public communities were reluctant to hire both women and minority women as school leaders because communities believed women were not as intelligent as men.

Today, unlike historical eras, a career in education affords opportunities for women and minorities. One such opportunity, real or perceived, is to occupy the position of public school superintendent. Even though opportunities have improved for women, a glass ceiling continues to bar the pathway to, and entry of, women into the position of superintendent (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1989). The ascension of women of color to the superintendency remains a significant feat, generally, considering the history of gendered and racial oppression in the United States (Alston, 2005; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2008; Grogan, 2005; Jackson, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989).

Traditionally, the superintendency has been a male-dominated profession and the number of men in the position continues to exceed the number of women superintendents (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Glass & Franceschini, 2007). According to Grogan (2007),

while women have made some gains in the principalship and the central office, the overwhelming majority of public school superintendents are White males (Skrla, Scott & Benestante, 2008). Kowalski (2011) asserted that 75.9% of all superintendents are men and 94% of this number are White.

In 1952, females comprised only 6.7% of the occupants in the position of superintendent (Skryla, Reyes & Scheurich, 2000). Forty years later, Glass (1992) reported the number of women superintendents minimally decreased to 6.6%. In 2007, Brunner and Grogan revealed that 18% of United States school districts were led by women.

Duwe and Mendez Morse (2010) also found that less than 20% of the superintendent positions in the United States were held by women. The number of female superintendents increased slightly in 2011 to 24% (Kowalski, 2011). Although the percentage of women superintendents has increased, this number does not reflect the percentage of women in the educational workforce.

The teaching force, in some cases, is the talent pool for selection of school leadership posts, the principalship, central office/district-level positions, and ultimately the superintendency (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Women comprised approximately 75% of the teaching force in 1997 and 2000, and increased to 76% in 2012 (National Center for Education Statics, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The Texas Education Agency reported that women comprised 77% of the teaching force in 2009, and 76.8% in the 2012-2013 school year. These numbers highlight the fact that approximately 75% of the educational teaching force and the potential superintendent candidate pool are women,

yet only 18-20% of superintendents in the United States are women (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Throughout the United States women are moving into the workforce and assuming powerful positions in a variety of professions, including public schools and the public school superintendency (Alston, 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Female leaders are now in an improved position to identify strategies for obtaining leadership posts (Bolman & Deal, 2003). During the 2011-2012 school year there were an estimated 115,540 principals of K-12 schools in the United States, and fully 52% of these public school principals were female (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). The percentage of female principals corresponds to the percentage of female central office leaders (Brunner & Kim 2010). However, the number of women in administrative positions in educational leadership does not parallel the number of women in the educational work force (Rodriguez, 2013).

Women are disproportionately underrepresented in the superintendency (Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan & Ballenger, 2007). However, research indicates women have had an interest in the superintendency and have obtained experience in district level positions in preparation for the position. Brunner and Grogan (2007) noted that 40% of the 202 women central office administrators in their study were interested in the public school superintendency. These authors found that 93.5% of their study participants, who were female central office administrators, had already obtained certifications or were completing the certification process. Although the data indicated a positive trend for women aspiring to, and acquiring, the superintendency Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) contended the number of women superintendents is still significantly

disproportionate to the number of females who are qualified and certified for the superintendency (Grogan & Shakefield, 2011; Rodriguez, 2013).

Scholars and practitioners have raised significant concerns about the limited number of Black/African American men and women superintendents. Alston (2005) reported that 10.9% of the United States' teachers were minorities, 12.3% were principals, and only 2.2% of the superintendents were persons of color. Coleman, Collins, Harrison-Williams and Sawyer (2009) reported that less than 3% of the country's superintendents are African American. Aiba-Weza (2012) revealed a decreased number of Black superintendents in suburban school districts.

Collier (2009) called attention to the significantly low number of Black/African American superintendents who comprised only 1% of the United States' public school systems. According to the National Alliance of Black School Educators (2010), 18 states had no Black superintendents. Conversely, these states also had minimal diversity in their student demographics. In 2010, only 366 African American superintendents were employed in the United States. This number represented only 2.5% of the 14,559 school districts in the nation (National Alliance of Black School Educator, 2010).

Still, the representation of minorities, minority women, and Black women in public school leadership and the superintendency, significantly decreases as these women move through the leadership pipeline (Brunner & Kim, 2010). In 2011, the National Center for Educational Information reported that of the nation's African American teachers, 90% were female (Gales-Johnson, 2013). During the 2007-2008 school year, only 17.6% of principals in the United States were minorities (Battle & Gruber, 2009), with Black women comprising 11% of principals (Peters, 2003).



Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) revealed this decrease of minority women in the educational pathway to the superintendency. They reported that 91.6% of women superintendents were White, 5.1% were Black, 1.3% Hispanic, 0.7% Native American and 0.7% of another ethnicity (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Hess (2002) indicated that 10% of United States' superintendents were minority women, inclusive of Black women.

The matriculation of women, minorities and women of color, from public school classrooms as students to educators, mid-management supervisors, principals and district-level administrators, and the superintendency, has been a topic of study and discourse for the last 30 years (Alston & McClellan, 2011; Alston, 1999; Brunner, 2008; Estler, 1987; Frasher, 1982; Gilligan, 1992; Grady, 1994; Grogan, 1996; Hudson, Wesson, & Marciano, 1998; Kim & Brunner, 2008; Montenegro, 1993; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Noddings, 1992; Peters, 2003; Rusch, 2004; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tillman, 2004, 2008; Young & McLeod, 2001; Wurushen & Sherman, 2008).

The first female superintendent in the United States, Ella Flagg Young, did not ascend to the superintendency until the early 1900s. Almost 60 years later, Dr. Barbara Sizemore, the nation's first Black woman superintendent, was selected to lead the Washington DC public school system in 1973. Gewertz (2006) explained that the American Association of School Administrators' 2000 report revealed that of the 14,000 public school superintendents in the United States, 15% were women of all races and ethnicities, and only 2% or less were Black female superintendents in the late 1990s. According to the 2015 American Association of School Administrators report, 237

African American males comprised 1.82% of the country's superintendents, however, only 155 or 1.19% of the nation's superintendents were African American females.

In 2015, more than 30 years after Dr. Barbara Sizemore served as the first African American chief executive officer of public schools, the underrepresentation of Black women in the public school superintendency is still pervasive and continues to exist as a phenomenon and topic of study. Although women, and women of color, are aspiring to and occupying the highest level of leadership in public schools, there remains significant under-representation of minority women in the chief executive officer position of public school superintendent. This underrepresentation of minority women, specifically Black women in the superintendency, prompts me to review the educational and professional experiences of Black female educators, school leaders, and central office administrators who aspire to, or serve in, the public school superintendency.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The United States' public school educational workforce, leadership pipeline, and student demographics are more racially diverse than ever, and increasingly comprised of females (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). While there has been an increase in the percentages of women and minorities in the superintendency over the past decade (Kowalski, 2011), their presence in the position still does not correspond to the diversity in the national educator demographics or public school student enrollment. In other words, the number of women in the superintendency does not reflect the number of women in the educational workforce (Rodriguez, 2013).

A review of the disproportionality of women and Black women in the superintendency does not imply there should be established quotas. This review of

demographic data that identifies the disproportionality is intended to demonstrate the dominance of women, and Black women, in the educational workforce and leadership positions, which is indicative of women's preparation and qualification for the superintendency. Women, specifically Black women, are viable and willing candidates for the public school superintendency.

Increased enrollment of women in educational administration doctoral programs suggests women aspire to the public school superintendency (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Larger percentages of female superintendents (57.6%) than male superintendents (43%) have doctoral degrees (Brunner & Kim, 2010). The number of female superintendents is negatively disproportionate to the number of women who have obtained certification and are qualified for the position (Grogan & Shakefield, 2011). Nationally, less than 20% of women serve as superintendents (Duwe & Mendez-Morse, 2010).

In 2002, 10% of the nation's superintendents were minority women (Hese, 2002). Grogan and Brunner (2005) reported that 8% of female superintendents were identified as minority women. The underrepresentation of Black female superintendents is especially concerning in the state of Texas considering the increasingly diverse demographics of its public schools. According to the Texas Education Agency enrollment report (2012), of the state's 4,847,844 students, 14% (679,351) were African American, 48.6% (2.4 million) were Hispanic, 4.1%, (198,992) were of another race or ethnicity, and 33% (1.6 million) were White. These rapidly changing, diverse student demographics will significantly affect social and cultural influences in Texas public schools (Rodriguez, 2013). In 2011, only 20% of all superintendents in Texas were women and 3.1% were African American (Texas Education Agency, 2012). Presently, less than 1% of Texas'

superintendents are Black women, who occupy roughly ten of the 1,032 superintendent posts in the state.

Leadership opportunities in the superintendency exist for women (Blount, 1999; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Grogan, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 1998; Washington-Lane & Jones-Wilson, 2010) and racial minority women (Alston, 1996; Jackson, 1999; Tallerico, 1999). The experiences of women and minority women have been documented in research (Brunner, 2008; Mendez-Morse, 1999; McNulty, 2002; Ortiz, 1999; Sovine, 2009). However, Black women remain underrepresented in the public school superintendency (Alston, 2000; Brunner, 1999, Daye, 2007; Gewertz, 2006; Glass, 2000; Glenn, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Revere, 1988; Vaughn, 2008).

The discourse, revealing the underrepresentation of Black women superintendents, suggested there are beliefs, systems, and processes that limit and control Black women's preparation for (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Jones, 2003), access to (Kowalski & Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 2000), attainment of (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000), and tenure in (Brown, 2011; Harris, Lowery, Hopson & Marshall, 2004; Pascopella, 2008), the public school superintendency. These systems and processes need to be investigated from a Black woman's perspective. Brunner and Grogan (2007) asserted that experiences are impacted by gender and race. Considering the underrepresentation of Black female superintendents, examining Black women's experiences of pursuing, attaining, and serving in the superintendency may provide insights regarding their unique *ways of knowing* that are not represented by traditional, White, privileged, or feminist epistemologies.

The norms and standards of the superintendency are informed by the discourse about those who serve in the position (Brunner, 2008). According to Kowalski (2011), nationally, 94% of all superintendents are White and 75% are male. White males constitute a vast majority of the superintendent positions (Glass, 2000). Thus the norms and standards of practice are informed mostly by White male perspectives (Brunner, 2005). For Black women, both gender and race, as opposed to gender alone, are critical factors in their leadership (Daye, 2007; Sanders-Lawson, Smith-Campbell & Benham, 2006; Tillman, 2004). Black women's unique gendered, racial perspectives and experiences are needed to inform, expand, and extend the norms and standards related to the practice of the superintendency.

The superintendency discourse had been aimed at detailing who occupies the position (Brunner & Grogan, 2002; Glass, 2000; Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Björk, Glass & Brunner, 2005; Glass & Björk, 2007) of superintendent and the barriers or conditions that make progress or achievement for women and Black women difficult (Alston, 1999; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Kim & Brunner, 2009). Minimal representation of Black women in the superintendency has resulted in research that is relatively absent of the perspectives and experiences of Black women. Conversely, the discourse inclusive of the perspectives of White males and females has been inaccurately generalized and applied to the experiences of the few Black women in the superintendency (Alston, 2000). Black women's experiences of aspiring to, and serving in, the superintendency are needed to develop counter-narratives that dispel the misconceptions about their pursuit and experience of the superintendency. These counter-narratives may also

uncover racial and gendered stereo-types, biases, and discrimination that permeate Black women's leadership experiences.

The lives of Black leaders and their lived experiences are instructive, considering the United States' historical contexts of marginalization, racism, and sexism in education (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Skrla, 1999, Skrla, Reyes & Scheurich, 2000; Tillman, 2004). The relative absence, omission, and minimization of Black women's experiences in the superintendency scholarship also yield misconceptions about Black women's pursuit of, preparedness for, and ascension to the position (Brunner & Kim, 2010). These misconceptions can work to reinforce racist and sexist constraints and barriers that negatively impact Black women's aspirations or success and longevity in the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan. 2007). Considering the underrepresentation of Black female superintendents, the study of Black women who are on the pathway of the public school superintendency may reveal issues associated with affirmative action, diversity, and equity policies related to the recruitment, selection, and retention of Black women superintendents.

With few Black women in the superintendency, only 1.9 % nationally (American Association of School Administrators, 2015), the formal superintendency, leadership networks and the systems of supports are not as accessible to, or influenced by, diverse district leaders (Alston, 2000; McClellan, Ivory & Dominguez, 2008). Inherent in the closed access to formal leadership networks (Brunner, 2000) is the limited availability of role models and mentors who can and are willing to support Black women aspirants and superintendents. The omission of Black women from these professional networks could further marginalize and oppress aspiring diverse leaders and their perspectives (Brunner

& Kim, 2010). Scholars have asserted the social and cultural importance and benefits of having superintendents (Jackson, 1999; Brooks-Golden, (2007), administrators, and teachers of color (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006) who can serve as role models for students and other leaders of color.

Shakeshaft et al. (2007) reported the simple availability and minimal number of mentors were barriers for women who aspired to leadership positions. Scholars have asserted that women aspiring to the superintendency benefit from coaching and mentor relationships with individuals who understand their uniqueness (Banuelos, 2008; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Garn & Brown, 2008; Sanchez & Thorton, 2010). These mentor relationships could be effective for supporting Black women's unique issues as they aspire to and attain the superintendency. The limited number of Black women superintendents lessens the availability of diverse racial and gender role models and mentors for those who aspire to serve in the superintendency (Alston, 2000; Campbell-Jones & Avlear-Lasalle, 2000; Goffney & Edmonson, 2012). The lack of diverse racial and gender mentors and role models also impacts diverse student populations (Alston, 2000).

According to the National Alliance of Black School Educators (2010), most African American superintendents led urban school districts with predominately African American student demographics. Close to three-quarters of the students enrolled in districts led by African American superintendents were minorities (Taylor, 2011). Based on the documented underrepresentation of Black women superintendents in Texas, there is obviously a limited number of Black women superintendents who could serve as role models for all students, administrators, and aspiring leaders.

Given the racial and gender demographics in education and the present disproportionate under-representation of Black women superintendents in educational leadership, issues of equity in opportunities, career preparation and advancement, and leadership practice are of interest and importance to practitioners, policy makers, and researchers. Texas is a state that has a significant underrepresentation of Black women in the superintendency.

This qualitative study focuses on the following problems: a) the disproportionate number of Black women serving as superintendents in the state of Texas, b) norms and standards of the superintendency which are largely informed by White male experiences, c) underrepresentation of Black women's gendered and racial epistemologies in the practice and study of the superintendency, and d) the paucity of narratives and counter-narratives documenting Black women's experiences pursuing, and functioning in, the superintendency. These problems call for further examination of Black women's educational and professional leadership experiences on the pathway of the public school superintendency.

### **Rationale for the Study**

There has been a significant shift in the roles and expectations of public school superintendents (Anderson, 2000; Hoyle, Björk, Collier & Glass, 2005; Ivory & Acker-Hocevar, 2007; Kowalsk, 2009; Kowalski & Brunner, 2005; Price, 2007). The superintendent's primary role has transitioned from one of *manager* (Cuban, 1976) to that of *instructional leader* (Barbie, 2003; Petersen, 1999; Leithwood & Reihl, 2003; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Schlechty, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2006; Wadlington, 2011). Instructional



leaders are those who create conditions and processes that significantly improve student achievement (Sanchez, Thorton & Usinger, 2009).

Marzano and Waters (2009) asserted the quality of a school district's superintendent most significantly impacts the quality of student achievement throughout the entire school district. They further concluded, "Effective leadership at the district and school levels changes what occurs in the classrooms, and what happens in the classrooms has a direct effect on student achievement" (p. 11). Superintendents must have an explicit understanding of the different cultures included in the communities that they serve (Hoyle, Björk, Collier & Glass, 2005).

In addition to the changed roles and expectations of the public school superintendent; the country's student demographics have become more racially and ethnically diverse. However; the demographics of the public school superintendency have not become as diverse as the students enrolled in the United States public schools. Scholars have identified the lack of diversity in school leadership as a problem because the world in which students will live as adults will be increasingly diverse, yet the leadership is not representative of cultural, racial and ethnic diversity (Sanchez, Thorton & Usinger, 2009). According to Magdaleno (2006) and Tillman (2004) Black and Latino administrators are effective role models for minority students. Sanchez, Thorton and Usinger (2009) found that role modeling by minority leaders is significant to students' identity development and aspirations.

As a society; we tend to be challenged to move the achievement pendulum for minority student populations. Minority district leaders may share similar cultural understandings and experiences with students who come from similar backgrounds.

Black women's leadership has the potential to advocate for diverse students and influence empowerment of students, staff, and all stakeholders in the public school environment (Alston, 2005, Harrison-Williams, 2000; Sanchez, Thorton & Usinger, 2009; Beard, 2012). Black women have the potential to take diversity agendas to scale at the district level. Leaders with similar characteristics, learning styles, and experiences can relate to, teach, support, and lead diverse learners and educators.

If the relative absence, omission, and minimization of Black women leaders' experiences in practice and research is not challenged, the public school superintendency may remain constructed by, and structured for, the current dominant powers, those of the White male (Dabney-Lieras, 2008, Daye, 2007; Goffney & Edmonson, 2012; Gewertz, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Shakeshaft & Jackson, 2003). The lack of proportional representation of Black women in the superintendency suggests processes at work that limit and otherwise screen-out Black women. If these factors do exist, understanding the superintendency process may suggest remedies at both the systems and personal levels.

The development of and access to discourse about Black women's experiences on a path to the superintendency is needed. These narratives, and counter-narratives, may contribute to the scholarship that is representative of Black women's perspectives and experiences. Studying the narratives of individuals along the superintendent pathway may give insight into the personal characteristics and attributes, educational requirements, and professional skills that might better prepare individuals for the journey to the public school superintendency.

As a Black woman aspiring to the public school superintendency and assistant superintendent, former executive director, principal and teacher, I have some

understanding of the role that race and gender have played in my own educational and professional leadership experiences. My interest in this study focused on the examination of whether, and/or how, other Black female leaders' racial and gendered identities inform their educational and professional experiences on the trajectory to the superintendency. It is my intention to contribute to discourse and offer narratives about Black women's experiences, from the perspectives of Black women.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Question**

Most of the research about women in educational administration over the past 30 years has centered on factors such as the glass ceiling (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Shakeshaft, 1989), under-representation of women's thoughts and experiences in research (Brunner, 2002; Glass, 2000, Kowalski and Stouder, 1999), discrimination, and gender bias (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Additional studies have focused on the historical context of White male dominance in the superintendency (Blount, 1999; Brunner, 2008; Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989), appropriate preparation (Brunner & Kim, 2010, Dana & Bourisaw, 2006), the inhibitors and barriers to successful ascension of women and minorities (Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Glass & Franceschini, 2007), career mobility (Kim & Brunner, 2008; Robinson, 2004), mentoring (Guptill, 2003; Hall & Klotz, 2001; January, 2006), and board/community relations (Hess, 2002; Kowalski, Peterson, & Fusarelli, 2008).

Blount (1999) offered insights into the construction of masculinity in schooling and the role that masculinity has had in school administration. The literature related to the public school superintendency is extensive. One focus emphasized in the literature was the identification of the gender demographics, motivators, inhibitors, challenges, and

demands related to attaining a superintendent position (Harris, Lowery, Hopson & Marshall, 2004).

However, African American men and women are underrepresented in the superintendency (National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2010; American Association of School Administrators, 2015). Current research and dissertations examine the underrepresentation and ascendency of African American men in the superintendency (Cheatom, 2014; Green, 2014; Jackson, 2002; Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003; Smothers, 2012; Wright, 2011). For example, Cheatom's dissertation explored how some Black male superintendents successfully navigated the system to gain access and achieve tenure (Cheatom, 2014). Green (2014) explicated the underrepresentation of Black male superintendents and their perspectives about the African American male student achievement gap in his dissertation. Taylor (2011) examined the ascendency of Black males to the superintendency. Although there were recent studies of Black men's experiences in the superintendency, research about the position was primarily inclusive of the White male perspective.

Specifically, empirical research about superintendents in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century largely represented the experiences of White men (Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002; Cuban, 1976; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999, Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 2000). There was a developing body of literature relative to the absence of women in the superintendency (Alston, 2000; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2008; Glass, 2000; Skrla, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989; Taylor & Tillman, 2009). There was also substantive literature on women superintendents (Anderson, 2000; Blount, 2003; Brunner, 2000, 2002; Brunner & Kim, 2010; Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Gardiner, Enomoto &

Grogan, 2000; Gewertz, 2006; Giddings, 2009; Grogan, 1996, 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005, 2008; Guptill, 2003; Katz, 2004, 2012; Ortiz, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 1998, 2000; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Tallerico, 1996, 1999, 2000). Although these studies acknowledged women and, minimally, Black women, in educational administration, there was still a paucity of available research related to Black women.

Tillman and Cochran (2000) contended that if we truly wished to desegregate urban schools, we would focus on desegregating the highest levels of school leadership, specifically the superintendency. As such, there was an emerging discourse focused on women and Black superintendents (Alston & Jones, 2002; Brunner, 2008; Jackson, 1999; Horsford, 2009; 2010; Horsford & McKenzie, 2008; Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003; Johnson, 2010; Nozaki, 2000). Horsford (2011) explicated the perspectives of eight Black superintendents regarding the vestiges of desegregation and unequal schooling contexts. Although studies related to White women and Black leaders in the superintendency had emerged, Alston (2000) explained that only a few had focused solely on Black women. Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) concurred with Alston, and asserted there had been relatively little published specifically about Black women superintendents or other women of color (Alston, 2005).

According to Brunner (2008), the discourse about the public school superintendency establishes the norms or standards of the position as it is constructed in texts and in the minds of others. The norms and standards of the superintendency have been inequitably guided by White male-dominated discourse. Blount (1999), and Tallerico and Blount (2004), explicated the gendered construction of school administration and historical and theoretical perspectives of women and the

superintendency. The superintendency has historically been a White male-dominated profession, thus the literature was overshadowed by the experiences of White male professionals.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether, and how, racial and gendered identities inform the educational and professional experiences of Black women who are on the path to the public school superintendency. This study may provide an understanding of the educational and professional experiences of the Black women participants in this study, as they matriculate the superintendency pathway. The intent of the researcher is to provide guidance to Black women who are serving in, or aspiring to, the superintendency. The study may also guide educational leadership programs and superintendent certification entities by providing specific data regarding educational and professional experiences that contribute to or inhibit Black women's preparation, ascension to and tenure in the public school superintendency. This study is also relevant to current issues in education and educational leadership, particularly in the state of Texas, where the educational workforce and student demographics have become increasingly diverse, yet the percentage (1.9%) of Black female superintendents remains underrepresented. To fully understand the impact of Black women's multiple identities on their educational and professional experiences the overall question that guided this inductive, qualitative study was:

In what ways do the racial and gendered identities of Black women inform their educational and professional experiences on the path to the public school superintendency?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study may offer insight into the perspectives and experiences of Black women whose experiences have been minimally represented in historical empirical studies. The study has merit for school improvement because it highlights the educational and professional experiences of Black female educational leaders who understand the racial and gender identity issues and the plight of students of color and diversity. As such, these Black female educators are in a unique position to ameliorate the educational environment for equity. The study of these educational leaders, who possess multiple identities, inform stand-point, critical race, Black feminist and feminist's theories and related practices in educational leadership.

Black women are under-represented in educational leadership and specifically in the public school superintendency. While women in general have attained the position of superintendent, there continues to be a disparity in the number of Black women superintendents. This under-representation, preparation and aspiration for, ascension to, and service in the superintendency have contributed to the discourse regarding Black women's leadership in the position. In summary, there are three significant reasons for this research.

The first reason emerged from the need for discourse that reveals the narrative voices of Black women superintendents and aspirants to provide them opportunities to share their perspectives about how their racial and gendered identities informed their educational and professional experiences. As asserted by Collins (2009):

The painstaking process of collecting the ideas and actions of "thrown away"

Black women...has revealed one important discovery. Black women intellectuals

have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community and society and, in doing so, created a multifaceted, African American women's intellectual tradition. (p. 5)

Given the sparse research about the educational and professional experiences of Black women superintendents and aspirants, it is imperative that research includes their voices, and investigates how their racial and gendered identities influence their experiences. The significance of this study is the inherent contribution to the public school superintendency scholarship and the varieties of methods used to create critical, culturally sensitive discourse. As Tillman (2002) contended:

In the absence of culturally sensitive research approaches, there will continue to be a void in what the larger research community knows and understands about the education of African Americans and as Dillard (2000) has noted, how African Americans understand and experience the world. (p. 4)

Peters (2003) elaborated on the minimal research focusing on Black women in educational leadership and explicated the importance of studying Black women as a marginalized group. In Peters (2003) dissertation she offered the following reasons for studying Black women's leadership as cited in Smith's dissertation. (Smith, 2008, p. 7):

1. It is important to understand how a racist, and gendered society impacts institutions, such as schools.
2. Since little data has been collected specifically and consistently about African American females in educational leadership, information is needed to accurately reflect changes in the profession.



3. Including African American women in the discussion on educational leadership dispels erroneous notions that they lack interest in leadership positions and that they are ineffective leaders.
4. Including African American women in the discussion on educational leadership is the key to understanding “multiple jeopardies” or “multiple burdens” that impact their opportunities to acquire leadership positions.

The second reason this study has significance is that it has the potential to assist in development of an understanding of how race, gender, and the intersection of these constructs may inform and influence the educational and professional experiences of Black women who have served as superintendents and those who aspire to the public school superintendency. Empirical data and research literature, as outlined in Chapter II, have interrogated the impact of race and gender in the public school superintendency. Other published works and dissertations have documented the effects of race and gender for Black women aspirants and superintendents. Few studies, if any, have specifically considered how the intersectionality of racial and gendered identities informed the educational and professional experiences of Black women at three specific points on (aspiring to, serving in, and former or retired from) the superintendency journey.

The educational leadership of Black women is “intersected by a unique set of challenges associated with race, gender, attitudes, organizational structures and policies” (Smith, 2008, p. 6). Current literature offers insight into barriers and challenges facing Black women educational leaders (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Brooks-Golden, 2005) and some discourse indicates strategies utilized to overcome these difficulties (Murtadha &

Watts, 2005). Studies detailing portraits and narratives of the lives, work, and impact of Black women in educational contexts are limited (Tillman, 2004).

Finally, this study may assist Black women and other women of color in examining how their own educational and professional experiences can be conceptualized for leadership preparation, generally, and specifically for preparation for, ascension to, and retention in the superintendency. As Collins (2009) stated:

A dialogical relationship characterizes Black women's collective experiences and group knowledge. On both the individual and group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness. For U.S. Black women as a collectivity, the struggle for a self-defined Black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby actions and thought inform one another. (p. 34)

Through this examination of how their racial and gendered identities inform their experiences in the educational leadership context of the public school superintendency, a dialogue of actions (experiences) and thought (perspectives) may occur.

The insights and findings of this study, as detailed in Chapter IV address the ways in which Black women leaders' racial and gendered identities inform their consciousness and interpretations of their educational and professional experiences. As the insights and findings of this study detail, the participants' perceptions of identity and identities served as motivators and inhibitors, they had non-traditional and non-linear educational and career pathways and their experiences of difference was inclusive of perspectives regarding diversity, struggle and activism. These themes reveal the participants'

understanding of the impact of their racial and gendered identities, while on the trajectory towards the superintendency. As such, this study may provide an understanding of how best to prepare and support Black female leaders in school district leadership and prepare them to resolve the challenge of ascending to and serving in the historically White male dominated profession of the superintendency.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

For this study, Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) provided the theoretical and conceptual grounding. As a stand-point theory, Black feminist thought creates a space to articulate interlocking forms of oppression and gives voice to Black women's fight for justice (Collins, 2009). Black feminist thought supports centering the experiences of Black women leaders, to examine their experiences on the pathway to the superintendency.

Intersectionality is based on the premise that variables work in groups. Therefore, the focus is on the formation of social identities. This study examined race and gender, and their intersections. The notion of intersectionality was used to determine if and how, Black women superintendents and aspirants perceived their experiences as being influenced by both race and gender simultaneously, within the context of superintendency.

### **Methods**

This qualitative study, in the spirit of bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001), was informed by three methods. Drawn from the inductive approaches of qualitative interviewing, ethnomethodology, and autoethnography, the study examines the experiences of five Black women educational leaders. The five participants in this study represent one

former superintendent, one current superintendent, and three Black women, including myself, who aspire to the public school superintendency.

The superintendency discourse and current dissertation have been inclusive of studies that employed qualitative methods such as narrative inquiry (Brown, 2011; Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Herring, 2007), phenomenology (Brown, 2011; Gayles-Johnson, 2013), interviewing (Alston, 1999; Daye, 2007; Jackson, 1999; Johnson, 2012; Williams Winthrop, 2002), and case study (Kennedy, 2008) to explicate Black women's experiences of the superintendency. Of these studies, most employed qualitative interviewing. However, none have focused on an approach borrowing from autoethnographic, ethnomethodological, and qualitative interviewing methods, or a bricolage of methods, to critically examine how race and gender inform the educational and professional experiences of Black women leaders along the path to the public school superintendency. In this study, I employed methods that have not been used, or used minimally, to research Black women educational district leaders to glean insight into the women's experiences through means that would elicit dialogue and yield rich, detailed narratives and counter-narratives. This bricolage included different methodological and interpretive perspectives to collect and analyze the data.

The autoethnographic aspect of this study has the potential to produce discourse that highlights personal experiences as meaningful research, while also emphasizing and engaging those experiences through a different lens. With a focus on the methods, norms, and understandings that people use to realize their experiences and actions, the ethnomethodological insights from the study could provide indications of how Black women educational leaders bridge theory and practice (Waite, 2009) subsumed by their

educational and professional experiences on the superintendency path. The qualitative interviews may provide clarity regarding how race, gender or the intersection of these constructs influence Black women's self-perceptions, educational and career trajectories, work-life and mentoring experiences, and minimized representation in professional and educational environments. The insights of this study may provide researchers, scholar-practitioners, aspiring, current, and former superintendents, in addition to graduate superintendent preparation program administrators, professors, and educational leadership scholars, with narratives from Black women educational leaders regarding the ways in which their racial and gendered identities informed their educational and professional experiences along the path towards the public school superintendency. This study may encourage discourse which contributes to the body of research literature, that might help school district leaders and educational scholars better understand school district leadership, leadership preparation, and support mechanisms for Black women's purposeful work at the nexus of theory and practice.

The study yielded research insights and findings that may be more accessible to diverse audiences than traditional research has been, making personal and social change possible for more people (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, Adams, & Bocher, 2011; Goodall, 2008; hooks, 1994). As asserted by Tillman (2002), culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans can facilitate the cultural knowledge of both the researched and the researcher (p.4). The methods and insights of this study have surely expanded my knowledge as the participant researcher and the self-researched. Through the autoethnographic glimpses of one Black woman, myself and documented accounts of Black women's educational and professional leadership experiences, readers of this study

may be encouraged to connect with the participants' stories and locate other units of analysis to interrogate how race, gender and the intersection of these social constructs inform educational and professional experiences in school district leadership and other leadership contexts.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

There are several delimitations to the study. First, the sample size of African American women superintendents was limited. A review of the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators and the Texas Education Agency School District directory only yielded nine Black female superintendents at the time the study was initiated. According to Brunner and Kim (2010) the number of women aspiring to the superintendency and seeking credentials for the position is greater than the number of superintendents. However, there is not a national or state-wide data base that documents superintendent aspirants. Thus, identification of aspiring superintendents and access to this cadre of educational leaders, was limited.

A second delimitation was not generalizing the study's findings to other women of color, males, and/or Black males. Comparing the educational and professional experiences of Black females to other female leaders, other minority leaders and Black men, may be of interest and need however, that was not the intent of this inquiry.

A final delimitation was that the study emanates from the lens of an individual researcher with multiple identities and a Black feminist perspective. Therefore, it was important in conducting this qualitative study, to identify prejudices and biases from my own experiences and life history. Identification of these biases, informed the reader of the lens and the filter that I used to interpret and analyze the data. During the analysis of

the data, I remained cognizant of personal prejudices and biases related to my own racial and gendered identities, cultural influences and experiences as a Black woman.

## **II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative inquiry and Black feminist theories to examine the ways in which the racial and gendered identities of Black women informed their educational and professional experiences along the pathway of the public school superintendency. This review of literature includes discourse related to the history of the public school superintendency. The chapter begins with a review of the dominance of White males in the position, which defined the norms and standards of the superintendency. It continues with a review of studies documenting women and racial minorities' representation in the position, as well as their experiences aspiring, ascending and serving as superintendents. The chapter concludes with a review of literature illuminating Black women's contributions to the field of education and their experiences and perspectives of educational leadership and the public school superintendency.

### **History of the Public School Superintendency**

#### **Job Roles and Responsibilities**

The superintendency was not established until the mid-1800s, although the system of public schooling was created as early as 1640 (Kowalski, 2006). Historically, the superintendent position has been a political post in which the roles and responsibilities have evolved over time (Björk & Keedy, 2001; Brunner, Grogan & Björk; 2002; Glass, 2000; Kowalski, 2006, 2000). The evolution of the superintendent's role as political, managerial, and instructional leader was inclusive of changes in the primary functions of the position. Superintendents, as politicians, were expected to negotiate with all stakeholders who had vested interests in the business of schooling. Hence, the formative years of the public school superintendency were indicative of expectations that the



superintendent be a pleaser who could appease various constituencies with divergent philosophies about public schooling and the superintendency (Kowalski, 2011).

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century had community elites, described by Kowalski (2006) as school board members, professionals and businessmen, who believed that superintendents should be servants to school board members. Björk and Gurley (2003) concluded that superintendents were expected to be “astute political strategists” (p. 9). According to Cuban (1996), as political leaders, superintendents had to negotiate with multiple stakeholders, including the school board or board of trustees, to glean approvals for actions, programs, and resources (Glass, 2000; Keedy & Björk, 2001).

As managerial leaders, superintendents were tasked with the maintenance and oversight of the district’s resources and making decisions about how things should be done (Houston, 2001; Kowalski, 2003a; Thompson, Wood & Honeyman, 1994). Knezevich (1984) noted that the early 20<sup>th</sup> century community elites lacked confidence in the superintendent’s abilities to manage school districts because superintendents, at the time, had been teachers who were prepared academically and experientially to manage human and material resources, not organizations. Kowalski (2003) reported that none of the superintendents appointed before 1910 were selected due to their managerial skills. As a result, community elites restricted the superintendent’s role and status, regulating them to menial assignments and routine tasks (Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002). Designation of the superintendent as manager propelled the quest to professionalize the position and educate school boards about the purposes of schooling and the superintendency.

The growth of school districts, with an accompanying emphasis on the standardization of practices and specialization of school administration as a profession that was marketable and different from teaching, were factors that supported the reconceptualization of the superintendent's roles. During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of the superintendency was defined by three primary roles: a) as an effective organizational manager, b) as democratic statesman, and c) as an applied social scientist. As social scientists, superintendents were expected to be stellar communicators and have specific knowledge and skills in a vast number of academic disciplines. Therefore, superintendents needed to be focused on educating school boards to better understand the educational and instructional purposes of the school system.

As instructional leaders, superintendents were tasked with curricular decisions, increasing the quality of instruction and improving student achievement (Lindsey, Roberts & Campbell-Jones, 2005; Morgan & Peterson, 2002). Spring (1994) contended that, historically, the development of the role of superintendent was related to the evolution of a hierarchical educational organization. Thus, the organization lobbied to have superintendents work full-time supervising classroom instruction and assuring uniformity in the curriculum. As such, the need for superintendents to understand the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of students was of key importance. This called for superintendents to be skilled as instructional leaders (Short & Scribner, 2004).

According to Kowalski (2006), leading involves making decisions about what to do to improve organizations. The attention to improving school districts as organizations has led researchers to introduce a new function of the superintendent, that of transformational leader. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) defined transformational leaders as

those who develop organizational cultures and climates collaboratively. As transformational leaders, superintendents are expected to assess local educational needs and recommend strategies for improvement, in coordination with the internal and external stakeholders.

Research on the early perceptions of the office focused on the roles and responsibilities of the public school superintendent and the dynamic philosophical views, political forces, and constraints of working in the position. Identity politics (Collins, 2009), in which women and minorities were stereotyped and oppressed, thus removed from consideration for the superintendency (Brunner, 2008), was also a common theme associated with the public school superintendency. In addition to the perceptions and reconceptualization of the roles, tasks, and functions of the superintendent much attention, both popularly and scholarly, had been devoted to *who* occupied the position of public school superintendent.

### **Demographics**

From its inception, significant attention and emphasis had been placed on who occupied the position of superintendent. Kowalski (2006) documented some of the reasons that a person was appointed to the superintendency in the early 20th century. He wrote:

Some were selected because they looked like leaders- a quality deemed to have political merit because the public would view the office holder as being competent. Some were selected because they were viewed as effective teachers—a quality deemed important with ensuring compliance with the state curriculum and effective instructional practices. Some were selected because they were

connected politically to the individuals who made the appointment. And some were selected simply because they were males, a decision reflecting a contemporary bias about organizational management. (p. 13)

There did appear to be a bias for, and selection of, men for the position of superintendent. The selection criteria noted by Kowalski (2011), particularly the selection of men for the position, appeared to have permeated the history of the public school superintendency (Glass, 1992, 2000, 2007).

From its inception in the mid-1800s, the superintendency had been dominated by White males (Blount, 1999; Brunner, 2008; Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989).

The percentage of men in the superintendency has not varied much since the 1900s. For example, in 1910, 91% of the superintendents were male; in 1930 men comprised 89% of the positions. The percentage of male superintendents increased to 91% in 1950, and 99% in 1971 and 1982 (Glass, 2000). Kowalski (2011) reported that 75.9% of all superintendents are men. According to Glass (2000), White males continued to hold the majority of the positions; making the superintendency the most male-dominated profession in the United States. The superintendent career pathway and preparation was initially constructed by men for men.

### **Preparation, Licensing, Certification, and Professional Experience**

The traditional requirements for the public school superintendency have included professional preparation, licensing and experience (Kowalski, 2006). In 1911, the idea of the superintendent as a profession, separate from teaching, had emerged (Sharp & Walter, 2004). By 1914 universities began teaching courses on educational administration. These early superintendency preparation tracts also included finance, business and

budgeting, and organizational methods courses. The establishment of new school administration programs intensified, as the superintendency was emphasized as a profession and the superintendent was considered the chief executive officer (Sharp & Walter, 2004). By 1971, 29.2% of all superintendents had doctoral degrees (e.g., Ed.D. or Ph.D.). This percentage increased to 45.3% by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, culminating with 99.7% of all superintendents having some type of graduate degree (Glass et al., 2000).

Prior to the mid-1980s the structure, quality, and effectiveness of university district administration programs received limited attention. These professional preparation programs were challenged and transformed as school reformers and other scholars within the profession began to question the effectiveness of school district governance and superintendent preparation programs (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). For example, in the 1980s, The National Commission on Excellence in Education Administration (1987) and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (1989) provided reports that indicated many of the superintendent preparation programs had become detached from the realities of practice (Kowalski, 2006). Although programs did not have a national curriculum, the 1980 reports led to the development of national standards specifically for superintendents, in an attempt to standardize educational preparation and licensing or certification for superintendents.

The words licensing and certification hold the same meaning in education. A license refers to a sufficient level of knowledge and skills, and certification connotes a level of competence that extends beyond basic practice. Since the 1980s, 82% of the states have enacted policies and laws for superintendent academic preparation and

licensing or certification. In 1990, 23 states required superintendency licenses. Meyer and Feistritz (2003) reported that 41 states continued to require preparation and licensing or certification for superintendents.

In addition to graduate studies and licensing or certification, public school superintendents had been required to have professional experience. Historically, teaching experience had been a requirement for principalship. Because all superintendents had been principals, the requirement for teaching experience had been associated with the position. Professional experience was a common requirement for superintendent licensing or certification. Nearly all states required superintendents to have had prior teaching or other related experience (Meyer & Feistritz, 2003).

Historically, the educational preparation, licensing or certification, and professional experience for the superintendency had been expanded in order to standardize the requirements of the profession. This expansion resulted in an increase of superintendents implementing similar professional practices. However, while the number of superintendents increased and the professional practices of the profession expanded, access to the superintendency by women and minorities remained minimal.

### **Gender and Race in the Public School Superintendency**

#### **Demographics**

The first female superintendent, Ella Flag, was not elected to the superintendency until 1909 and Dr. Barbara Sizemore, the first Black female superintendent was appointed to the position in 1973. It took more than 50 years for women to enter the profession and approximately another 150 years before Black women entered the superintendency.

The percentage of women in the superintendency has varied considerably since the 1900s. For example, in 1910, 8.9% of the superintendents were female; in 1930 women comprised 11% of the positions. Then the percentage of women superintendents began to decline: 9% in 1950, 1.3% in 1971, and 1.2% in 1982 (Blount, 1988). According to Kowalski (2011), in 1992, the percentage of women rose to 6.6%, then to 13.2% in 2000, and finally to 14% in 2011.

The National Alliance of Black School Educators' 2010 report indicates that 3% of the nation's 15,000 public school superintendents are African American. The American Association of School Administrators (2015) reported the number of African American Superintendents in 2013, 2014, and 2015 in the four geographical areas: Eastern, Mid-America, Mountains, and West. This report indicated the number of African American Superintendents decreased in the last three years in the Eastern area: 196 in 2013, 189 in 2014 and 174 in 2015. A similar decrease over the last three years was noted for the Mid-America states: 190 in 2013, 174 in 2014, and 186 in 2015. States in the Western sector of the country had fewer African American superintendents than those represented in Mid-America and the West, and only a minimal increase during the last three years: 20 in 2013, 23 in 2014 and 26 in 2015.

For those states in the geographical area referred to as the Mountains, while minimal increases were reported, this sector of the country had the fewest number of African American superintendents: 4 in 2013, 6 in 2014, and 7 in 2015. The 2015 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) also revealed the actual number of African American Superintendents by state compared to the percentage of Black superintendents in each state. The AASA report (2015) indicated that 28.9%, (44 out of

152) of Mississippi's superintendents are Black. In South Carolina, 26.8% (22 out of 88) superintendents are African American. African Americans comprise 5.0%, (44 out of 863) of Illinois' superintendents, while in California 2.1% (23 out of 1,052) superintendents are identified as Black. In Texas, 3.1% (32 out of 1,032) superintendents are African American.

### **Women and Racial Minorities in Leadership**

Gender and race have been cited as two factors that impact the opportunities of individuals attaining the superintendency (Atiba-Weza, 2012). Bell, McLaughlin and Sequeira (2002) defined the glass ceiling as the invisible or artificial barrier that prevents women and people of color from advancing past a certain level. The glass ceiling appeared to be prevalent for women and minorities who aspired to the public school superintendency.

Generally, women were neither encouraged to seek, nor given proper consideration for the superintendency until later in the 1900s. An early example, a White pioneer woman named Ella Flagg Young, successfully navigated the political and gendered landscape of the superintendency. In 1909 Ella Flagg Young assumed the superintendency of the Chicago schools. Blount (1998) shared Ms. Flagg's optimism of women leading, in fact *ruling* the schools of every city, when she wrote:

Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. I look for a large majority of the big cities to follow the lead of Chicago in choosing a woman for superintendent. In the near future, we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system. It is women's natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied



leadership. As the first woman to be placed in control of the schools of a big city, it will be my aim to prove that no mistakes have been made and to show cities and friends alike that a woman is better qualified for this work than a man. (p. 1)

Ms. Flagg's hope of women's leadership as superintendents was partially realized, as women did pursue and obtain positions as public school superintendents in the 1900s. However, the first Black female superintendent, Barbara Sizemore, realized the hope of women's leadership in 1973, when she achieved the superintendency in the nation's capital city, Washington DC.

Dr. Sizemore's tenure in the superintendency spanned 1973 to 1975. During this time, she articulated and demonstrated her particular interest in raising academic achievement for African American students (Arnez, 1982). Dr. Sizemore stated in a speech that she had "a higher calling than educating children, and that was uplifting my race." This comment caused controversy and in the same 1975 Washington Post interview, she lamented, "I did not understand that in order to be superintendent of schools I was to give up my higher mission." The first female superintendent and the first Black woman superintendent were identified as leaders who were ahead of their time, as they both dared to hope and achieve the superintendency, which was historically, and exclusively comprised of White males.

Harris, Lowery, Hopsen, and Marshall (2004) provided the following explanations regarding barriers for women superintendents: a) career paths that indicate more years spent in the classroom prior to entering the position, b) family concerns and lack of family support, and c) perceptions of the politics that are consistently present in

superintendency. Although perceived barriers or inhibitors have been studied, women, though few in number, have achieved the superintendency.

Brunner and Kim (2010) detailed in their essay that aspiring and practicing superintendents were well prepared for the superintendency. These researchers identified a three faceted model regarding women's preparedness. They noted the following categories in their preparedness model: a) formal preparedness as defined by the advanced educational administrative training and education obtained through coursework and programs offered by universities and all institutions of higher education, b) experiential preparedness as characterized by a superintendent candidate's employment record, career experiences, and professional experiences that relate to leadership performance, and c) personal preparedness, defined as a candidate's personal attitude towards pursuing the role and the role of the superintendency. The intent of Brunner and Kim's 2010 essay was to dispel the myths and misunderstandings regarding female superintendent candidates' capacities and capabilities for the public school superintendency.

Researchers have also identified perceived barriers and inhibitors for females and Black males' ascension to the position. For example, Atiba-Weza (2012) examined the lack of mentoring as a potential barrier for women and Black male superintendents. Responding to the questions a) who determines whether or not aspirants are prepared, and b) how are aspirants prepared, Atiba-Weza found that mentoring relationships were beneficial for access and ascension to the superintendency for Black men and women.

Goffney and Edmonson's (2012) study highlighted the benefits of mentoring for female superintendents. Their study of three novice female superintendents, one White,

one Hispanic, and one Black, explored the impact of gender and race on their professional careers as public school superintendents. The six themes that emerged in this study included the following: a) race as a non-issue for performance, b) *no excuses* attitude, c) collaborative leadership, d) work and family balance, e) the importance of spirituality, and f) positive relationships with other superintendents, inclusive of mentoring.

### **Research About Women Superintendents**

The fact that there are so few women superintendents, means the data gathered from a representative sample of female superintendents literally disappears when analyzed as part of a sample of all superintendents (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000). Skrla (1998) asserted, as more studies about women superintendents are completed, researchers and practitioners would obtain a better understanding of female superintendents' work lives. Blount (1999) reported that historically, the work in schools had been gender differentiated and stratified, supporting patriarchy as a powerful defining force for school administration. The following several studies served as the foundations for the research agenda related to women in the superintendency.

Shakeshaft (1989) examined the development of research of women and gender in educational administration and provided foundational work, introducing the term *androcentric*, the practice of viewing the world and shaping reality through a male lens. Shakeshaft suggested studying male behavior and, more particularly, White male behavior, is not in and of itself a problem. However, research of such White, male dominant positions, becomes a problem when its results are generalized to females and others who do not fit this narrow demographic.

Duwe and Mendez-Morse (2010) highlighted Shakeshaft's (1989) six stages of research that identified the paradigm shifts regarding research related to women in the superintendency. These six stages are inclusive of the following: Stage one provided descriptive statistics regarding the number of women who served in the district administrative positions. Stage two identified women administrators and revealed their common characteristics related to women educational leaders. This stage reported women's demographic and attitudinal descriptions and narratives from former female administrators. Stage three detailed research that questioned the paucity of female educational leaders and identified barriers to the advancement of women in educational administration. It is noted that the data in stage three research were obtained via surveys of attitudes toward and of women, as well as some experiential studies that revealed discrimination.

Stage four, research in Shakeshaft's (1989) model, began in the 1990s and was inclusive of the voices of women who described their experiences and their lives from the female perspective. The women in this stage responded to questions related to the barriers of the superintendency and the impact the barriers had on their aspirations to the position. Stage five focused on how theory needed to change and be revised to include women's perspectives and experiences. In this fifth stage, researchers revealed how women challenged theory in the ways that they lead, their career paths and their attitudes toward administration (Duwe & Mendez-Morse, 2010). The leadership styles of women were described as collegial and collaborative, as opposed to the autocratic, top-down leadership styles associated with male superintendents. The sixth and final stage provided a reconceptualization of theories of human behavior as related to school

administration. This stage of research included the experiences of females, males, and other ethnic and racial minorities in an effort to better understand and define the public school superintendency.

The difficulties inherent for women due to male domination in the role, were further documented through research, as detailed by the examples provided in this review. McCabe and Dobberteen (1998), surveyed 270 female superintendents regarding the role of the public school superintendent in order to understand their satisfaction with the position and to identify the constraints associated with it. Survey respondents identified the following challenges: a) the role of superintendent is still considered masculine, b) societal gender roles affected career expectations, c) family routines and practices are affected by career expectations, and d) stereotypical gender-related attitudes and behaviors are still expected (p. 2).

Brunner's 1998 study identified seven gender-specific strategies that successful female superintendents employed. The seven strategies included: a) balancing both role and gender expectations; b) keeping their agenda simple to focus on the care of children and their academic achievement; c) remaining *feminine* in their communication styles while navigating the masculinized culture; d) disregarding the concept of *acting like a man* while working in an essentially male role; e) removing anything that blocks success; f) maintaining a fearless, *can do* posture while also ensuring *down time* to rejuvenate; and g) sharing power and credit, similar to a servant leader who orients her work toward the service of others. The strategies identified by Brunner (1998) suggested that women approach and experience the superintendency in different ways from their male counterparts (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

Kowalski and Stouder (1999) examined the perceived career barriers experienced by women superintendents in order to investigate the personal characteristics central to women's ascension to the superintendency. They categorized perceived barriers either as internal or external. Internal barriers were ascribed to the individual and included lack of self-confidence and lack of tenacity, while external barriers were attributed to family, institutions, or society and included lack of family support, lack of collegial support, lack of employment opportunity, gender discrimination, family responsibilities, and race/ethnic discrimination. These researchers noted how gender discrimination was often unidentifiable, since study participants were unable to articulate experiences related to covert discrimination based on their experiences.

Tallerico (2000) described and examined the practices of superintendent search firms and school board selection processes in terms of equity for women and minorities. Tallerico used gatekeeping and career mobility theories for her case study conducted in New York. Tallerico's purpose for conducting the study was to demystify search and selection procedures for superintendents and aspiring superintendents. The findings of her study illuminated elements of the hiring process that limited women and minorities' ascension to the superintendency such as, the definition of *best qualified*, stereotyping and other cultural dynamics, and the role of *good chemistry* in job interviews. Tallerico uncovered unwritten selection criteria that revealed school boards made selections based on specific job titles rather than skills, tended to value line positions, and were likely to select candidates that resembled themselves. Most board members were men. Thus, male candidates were advantaged.

Skrla, Reyes and Schurich's (2000) study presented findings that focused on how women who had been superintendents think and talk about their gender. The results of their study yielded themes related to sexism, silence, and solutions. Specifically, the theme of sexism revealed a questioned competence of female superintendents, in this sense that the participants reported their abilities, at times, were overtly and covertly challenged as a result of their gender. The sexism theme also exposed sex-role stereotypes that participants experienced from their school boards, school and community members, as related to the female superintendents' behaviors, roles, and job performance. Intimidation was another indicator associated with sexism. Participants reported intimidating behaviors and tactics were displayed by both board and community members.

The theme of silence in Skrla, Reyes, and Schurich's (2000) study, related to personal silence, silent preparation programs, and silence of the profession. In regard to personal silence the study participants talked individually and as a group about their own silence on issues related to gender in their superintendency experiences (p. 62). The researchers reported preparation programs were silent on issues related to gender in the superintendency. The research participants indicated the educational administration profession did not adequately or appropriately address the discriminatory treatment and sexism of female superintendents. The participants of Skrla, Reyes, and Schurich's (2000) study proposed solutions that clustered into six categories: a) research, b) integrated discourse, c) university preparation programs, d) state agencies and professional organizations, e) school boards, and f) women's upbringing (p. 65).

Grogan and Brunner (2003) provided the first comprehensive study of 723 women superintendents and 472 female central office administrators. Their survey results indicated the overwhelming majority of women superintendents and district leaders were White. Female central office administrators served in a variety of positions at the assistant/associate or deputy superintendent level and the majority were responsible for district oversight of curriculum and instruction. Additional findings from Grogan and Brunner's 2003 study included: women superintendents raised children while they were in the position, they engaged in commuter marriages, 50% reported routes to the position that began with teacher, then moving through principal and then central office roles before becoming a superintendent. In fact, 17% assumed the position after going from teaching to central office.

Grogan and Brunner's (2003) study also revealed half of the women in the study gained their first superintendency less than one year after they were certified and began to apply for positions. With regard to women superintendents' perceptions of their school boards' expectations, respondents indicated that educational leader was a primary expectation, while there was also an increase in the number of respondents who reported political leadership as a primary expectation. Additionally, 9.9% of women superintendents believed their board expected them to lead reform initiatives and 13% reported depending on the school board and board chair for policy direction. Women superintendents also reported they centered their work on children and families and valued community building (Grogan & Brunner, 2003)

Tallerico and Blount (2004) provided insights regarding the socio-cultural factors hampering women's succession to the superintendency. Lemasters and Roach (2012)



detailed eight factors that women considered as barriers to their ascension to the position. These factors included: limited time for career mobility, career aspirations being placed behind family responsibilities, family commitments taking priority over career advancement, limited access to mentors within the organization, exclusions from established network systems, sponsorship not available within the organization, and entering educational administrative positions too late (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

Grogan (2005) reviewed the results from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) 2003 national survey and argued that women were still seen as anomalies in the superintendency and that collaborative efforts were needed to bring about change and removal of the barriers to women's ascension. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) provided research that detailed women superintendents' perspectives regarding barriers, such as glass ceilings, lack of mentoring and board/community resistance, such as non-responsiveness to requests. Lemasters and Roach (2012) highlighted Dana and Bourisaw's 2006 findings, noting *cultures* were generally less likely to elect or appoint a woman to the superintendency because women are not often observed in more powerful positions, such as the superintendency.

The 2006 American Association of School Administrators study explored the differences in female and male superintendents' perceptions of barriers or roadblocks to the position. Glass and Franceschini (2006) reported that female superintendents definitely perceived more *roadblocks* existed for females, than for their male colleagues. According to these researchers, the fact that almost twice as many female superintendents selected *gender discrimination by boards* and *presence of a glass ceiling* as constraints,

and substantiated the differences in opinion between males and females regarding the barriers of the position.

Brunner (2008) contended the discourse generated from the 2000 AASA study remained comprised of the voices, views, experiences, and standards of White men. Brunner's (2008) disaggregation of the AASA data, revealed male and female superintendent groups responded differently in several areas, such as the length of teaching service, age at their first administrative appointment, and years of superintendency experience. Brunner's critique of her own contributions to a chapter of the 2000 AASA study exemplified her intent to reduce research practices that restrict or limit the discourse of marginalized groups, such as superintendents and others. Therefore, Brunner (2008) contended, when the disaggregated data of women and persons of color were not published, the discourse related to these two groups became invisible. Educational research specific to African Americans comprises but a small portion of the mainstream educational discourse (Tillman, 2002).

### **Research About Black Male Superintendents**

While women have been underrepresented in the superintendency, the underrepresentation of Black men in the position has also been researched. Researchers have studied Black men in the superintendency in an attempt to reveal their experiences aspiring to, and serving in, the position. Additionally, scholars have explored how race may present a barrier, gender is considered an advantage for Black male superintendents.

Jackson's 2002 study of suburban superintendents on Long Island, New York concluded there was a minimal number of African American males in suburban school and districts. He further challenged the misconception that Black candidates were not

available to fill vacancies in the state. Parker (2009) explained that Black men cited the lack of mentors as a challenge to access and success in the superintendency.

Taylor's (2011) study examined the ascendancy of Black males to the superintendency. Taylor found Black men experienced racial bias and discrimination in their quest to be superintendents. Wright (2011) used a case study approach to detail information about the career paths and impact of racism on current African American male superintendents in North Carolina. Wright revealed the participants believed that possessing a terminal degree and persistent pursuit of the position were key factors in overcoming barriers ascending to the superintendency.

Green (2014) highlighted the underrepresentation of Black male superintendents. His study examined Black male superintendents' perspectives regarding the African American male student achievement gap. Cheatom (2014), examined the underrepresentation of African American males in the superintendency in Texas. He explored how some African American male superintendents successfully navigated the system to gain access and continue to serve in the position. The study revealed three themes: (a) ascension to the superintendency, (b) continuation in the superintendency, and (c) leadership for social justice. The key findings in the theme of ascension to the superintendency were spiritual capital and job proficiency. The key findings in the theme of continuing in the superintendency were operations, problem solving, hiring the most qualified, and board relationships. The key findings in the theme of leadership for social justice, were social justice leadership, student focus, and mentoring future leaders.

## **Black Women in the Public School Superintendency**

### **Demographics**

The paucity of research available about women in the superintendency appeared to correspond with the number of Black women superintendents. A few research studies and demographic data entities have attempted to establish demographic profiles of Black female superintendents (Tillman & Cochran, 2000). According to Alston (2000), there were only five Black superintendents in 1978. The ranks of Black female superintendents increased to 11 in 1982, 16 in 1983, 29 in 1984, and 25 in 1985 (Arnez, 1981; Revere. 1985). In 1993, the data revealed that of the 2000 female superintendents, only 20 were Black women (Bell & Chase, 1993). Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) reported Black female superintendents represented 5.1% of the nation's 2,000 women superintendents. More recently, the national percentage of Black women superintendents had been reported to be 1.9% (American Association of School Administrators, 2015).

### **History**

While studies and limited discourse have focused on women and a few on Black men in the superintendency, there have been studies that have considered the experiences of Black women in education, educational leadership, and the superintendency exclusively. Alston (2000) asserted the history of Black women in school administration was intertwined with the history of Black women in teaching. Teaching was considered one of the top professions occupied by Black women.

In the 1930s, Jeanes Supervisors, Black women who were fundamentally superintendents, placed significant interest on the improvement of instruction, introduction of new methods and curricula, and the organization of professional

development or in-service training (Alston, 2005). Like modern-day superintendents, the Jeanes Supervisors faced numerous obstacles in this administrative position. However, these Black women served as crisis handlers, negotiators, resource allocation and management specialists, communication facilitators, staff/professional developers, and personnel/human resources specialists (Alston, 2005), in school systems that were predominately comprised of Black students and staff.

Although Jeanes Supervisors provided benefits for the schools, students, staff, and communities they served, they were phased out during the era of public school desegregation. Interestingly, leaders of the White schools remained, but the Black school leaders did not (Alston, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989). By the 21<sup>st</sup> century Black teachers and administrators did begin to grow. Thus, Black women successfully navigated the pathway from teaching to the superintendency.

The representation of Black women in the superintendency had been as equally limited as the discourse specific to Black women in the position. However small, there had been Black women who transgressed the oppressive, racist and sexist landscape of educational leadership to ascend to the public school superintendency (Alston, 2000, 2005; Jackson, 1999). While the history of Black women may have been laden with racist, sexist and discriminatory acts, and words and narrative misrepresentations, these aspects could not impede or stymie the leadership of Black women. There has been an increase in the production of discourse, as a result of the of Black women leader's attainment of the superintendency.

Foundational studies of Black women superintendents by Alston (1999), Arnez (1982), Hudson, Wesson and Marcano (1998), Jackson (1999), and Revere (1987), in

addition to Brunner and Peyton-Caire's (2000) study of an aspiring Black female superintendent and Gewertz' (2006) article are provided in detail for this review. The experiences and perspectives of Black women in the superintendency have most recently been documented in several doctoral dissertations (Brown, 2011; Daye, 2007; Celastin, 2003; Collier, 2009; Gales-Johnson, 2013; Herring, 2007; Johnson, 2012; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Williams-Winthrop, 2002; Williams, 2011). The findings of selected dissertations, those pertaining more specifically to Black women's preparation, practice, and tenure in the superintendency, will be summarized. These studies, both published and unpublished documents have centered on aspiring, practicing, and former Black women superintendents. As such, they have served as the foundation for, and continuation of, the research agenda for Black women in the superintendency.

### **Research About Preparation, Aspirations, and Recruitment**

According to Tillman (1999, 2004) universities, colleges, schools, and departments of education have played a major role in perpetuating the dominance of White men in administration and have generally failed to provide adequate support for Black women in professional preparation programs. The superintendent preparation programs are the environments that have the greatest opportunity for early identification of Black women who will ultimately be selected or encouraged to self-select the superintendency as a career option (Tillman & Cochran, 2000).

Although there have not been studies that have specifically examined the impact of superintendency preparation programs for Black women, research has documented the experiences of Black women aspiring to the position. For example, Brunner and Peyton-Caire's 2000 study explored the reactions of a Black female graduate student, aspiring to

the superintendency to the narrative data of one Black female superintendent. The purpose of the study was to identify the structural barriers facing a Black woman enrolled in an educational administration program.

The researchers (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000) identified these three structural barriers related to superintendent ascendancy: narrow perspectives, risky research and curriculum, and lack of literature about Black female superintendents. Narrow perspectives referred to the dominance of White men in both educational administration programs and dominance of their perspectives in the curriculum. Risky research and curriculum related to the notion that topics focused on women and women of color are risky business for professors' instruction, curriculum, and research agendas. The third barrier, lack of literature about Black women in the superintendency, was explained as further evidence that they are scarcely represented in the ranks. According to Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000), Black women's scarcity in school districts makes their practices in the superintendency almost invisible to most Black women who are preparing for and aspiring to the position.

The educational administration programs are the environments and entities for superintendent preparation. They have also served as recruiting grounds for the position. It is noted that if the preparation programs have so few Black women, then their recruitment as superintendents, will remain limited. Recruitment is inextricably linked to hiring practices (Tillman & Cochran, 2000) and eventually to ascension to the superintendency.

Brown's 2011 dissertation included the results of her qualitative narrative study. Her study sought to respond to the question: Do African American/Black women

perceive recruitment and retention to the superintendency as intimately connected to gender, race and social politics? Brown (2011) explored the perceptions of eight Black female superintendents' struggle for equal education, preparation, recruitment and retention. The findings of the study revealed the historical influences of the Civil Rights Era and the intersection of race, gender and social politics as these related to the Black women's recruitment and retention in the superintendency.

### **Research About Ascension**

Recruitment of Black women into the superintendency had not been a priority among those who were making the decisions (Tallerico, 2000; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Although recruitment of Black women was targeted, fortunately, some Black women were able to ascend to the ranks of public school superintendent. Researchers have explored and documented Black women's presence and experiences in the superintendency.

As an example, Arnez (1982) noted the promise of affirmative action had not been realized in eliminating racial and gender discrimination for Black women in education. Arnez (1982) wrote, "in spite of the fact that these two factors, sexism and racism, have prevailed, a few highly qualified Black women have flung off this double discrimination and made district contributions to education in positions beyond that of the principalship" (p. 309). Arnez identified the 11 Black female superintendents, out of 176 women superintendents, who were in the post. She also highlighted the contributions of Dr. Barbara Sizemore, the nation's first Black female superintendent, as well as the achievements of Ruth B. Love, the first Black and first female general superintendent of the Chicago Public School System.



Revere's (1987) study was one of the few research efforts that explored Black women superintendents' experiences. The study cited six factors that contributed to Black women's success in the superintendency. The women reported that they had the competency and skills needed for the position, such as risk taking, organizational skills, and they were energetic and knowledgeable about all aspects of district administration. Further, the study revealed the participants were industrious and worked toward their goals, possessed high self-esteem and confidence, had the strength to persevere in the midst of demands and challenges, had a propensity for establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and exhibited significant productivity in exercising authority and in effectively enhancing their power base (Tillman and Cochran, 2000).

Hudson, Wesson and Marcano (1998), revealed four themes in their interview study of Black female superintendents. First, they indicated that Black women evidenced tremendous strength, perseverance, and survival skills. Secondly, the researchers cited a strong theme of advocacy. The third theme involved the Black women's aspirations for educational leadership. Additionally, the Black women in the study viewed themselves as role models and sources of pride for their communities. According to the researchers (Hudson, Wesson & Marcano, 1998), Black women superintendents understand their failures and successes have an impact on the future opportunities for other Black women and minorities.

Jackson's (1999) study, which has since been published as articles and included in book chapters, detailed the history and biographies of the 32 African American female superintendents in the position from 1993-1994. Jackson specifically focused her study on the contributions, benefits, and achievements of these Black female superintendents.

Jackson cited four themes from the interviews. These included opportunities to serve as role models for diverse student populations, provision of humanistic and relational leadership styles, an understanding and commitment to ensuring equitable educational opportunities, and support and experiences as they grew up that prepared them for leadership (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Tillman & Cochran, 2000).

Jackson's 1999 study belied the misconception that Black women were not as well prepared as other aspiring superintendents. She reported Black female superintendents held doctoral degrees, had significant educational leadership experience, and strong community ties (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Jackson (1999) noted these women accepted their *life in a fishbowl* and the public persona that accompanied this political and very visible life.

Daye's 2007 dissertation included qualitative interviewing. She presented findings from interviews with five sitting or practicing Black female superintendents. The participants in the study discussed the perceptions of the impact of race and gender on their roles in the position. Study participants revealed how they dealt with perceived race or gender-related barriers and constraints. Daye (2007) identified the methods that the Black female superintendents used to deal with race and gender inequalities and social injustices, in an effort to support an understanding of their resilience and support extended tenures in the superintendency.

### **Research About Tenure and Retention**

Alston's, (1999) study, similar to Jackson's (1999), was also published as articles, and in an edited book. Alston cited both barriers and facilitators or supports that Black women experienced as superintendents. She revealed how the women in her study

ranked the following five factors as moderate to great barriers on their route to the superintendency: absence of *old boy network* as a support system and for sponsorship, lack of awareness of political maneuvers, lack of role models, and societal attitudes indicating Blacks lacked competency in leadership positions, and the lack of formal or informal methods to identify Black aspirants for administrative and leadership positions (Alston, 1999; Brunner & Caire, 2000).

Alston (1999) also revealed six facilitators or supports that the participants ranked in the following order: positive working relations with the school boards, teamwork with qualified and experienced faculty and staff, acceptance by employers who were not Black, confidence in personal and professional capabilities, provision of mentors or sponsors, and acceptance by Black teachers and administrators. Alston's study highlighted the need for role models and support systems as Black women aspire to and serve in the superintendency.

Alston (2005) identified challenges that Black female leaders encountered on the path to the public school superintendency. Alston's research (2000, 2005) responded to the "unfortunate side effect" (p. 9) of the sparse literature, as described by Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) that "maintained the marginalization of women and people of color from the ranks of administration" (p. 533). Alston documented constraints related to the absence and lack of networking and support systems, limited access to the knowledge of internal organizational structure and a minimal cadre of role models from whom Black women could gain organizational knowledge. The challenges identified by Alston were relative to the glass ceiling, however, her study participants ranked race and gender

lowest on the list of barriers or obstacles. Gewertz reviewed the impact of race and gender and the superintendency.

Gewertz (2006) noted that educators and scholars have disagreed about whether being female and Black influences the manner in which a Black woman is perceived in the superintendency. Gewertz provided anecdotal evidence from eight current and former Black female superintendents, who indicated that race and gender did influence perceptions of them. Superintendent, Gerry House, who held a doctorate in educational administration reported that she experienced negative incidents related to her racial and gendered identities. She indicated that people may be assured of Black women's skills with curriculum and instruction. However, their comments and actions indicated they do not have confidence in a Black woman's ability to deal with the tough issues such as budget, maintenance, and facilities. Former superintendent, Marion Bolden believed that gender bias was more of a barrier for her because her community was more concerned that she was a local female educator, rather than an outsider, and she was often treated disrespectfully by male community members.

According to Gewertz' (2006) article, Ms. Ackerman, superintendent, indicated that demonstrated success can lead to Black women superintendents being viewed as *autocratic* rather than *decisive*. Ms. Smith, former superintendent, reported the community's reaction can be tinged with race and gender, as she recalled that her directness was viewed as more distasteful because she was a Black female. Deborah Jewell-Sherman explained that being Black and female affected her job as superintendent in contradictory ways. She reported that she was viewed as being *too pro-Black* and not as concerned with White students. At the same time, she was accused of favoring White

people because she hugged White teachers at a meeting. These anecdotal reports from current and former Black women superintendents indicated the complexities involved in determining the racial and gendered dynamics of the superintendency.

Johnson (2012) employed qualitative interviewing to explore the experiences and perspectives of six Black female superintendents, in order to understand the ways in which they responded to barriers and adversity in their roles as these pertained to racism and sexism. Johnson's (2012) study focused on the superintendents' resilience to retain the position. The study participants reported the following components related to their resiliency in the superintendency: engaging the community, building relationships with stakeholders, being courageous and clear in their leadership stances, being true to personal values and ethics, having strong religious faith, benefiting from love, support and encouragement of parents, family and friends, and listening, as critical success factors. The study participants also revealed they mentored novice and aspiring Black female superintendents, in an effort to contribute to the profession. Johnson's (2012) participants reported their need to be continuous learners and their effort to achieve life-work balance.

In general, the literature suggested the Black women experience *gendered racism* (Blake, 1999) even when they cannot or do not recognize or articulate their experience of this phenomenon. As a result, Black women can and do face significant challenges when aspiring, ascending to, and serving in the public school superintendency.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review, inclusive of the historical aspects of the superintendency, detailed the political and professional expectations of the position and uncovered the

perceptions and beliefs about *who* should, could, and would be a public school superintendent. The overview also addressed discourse that detailed women, minorities, and Black women in the superintendency and the motivators, inhibitors, barriers, and challenges identified for their pursuit of, ascension to, and practice in the position of superintendent.

This historical overview of the research related to the superintendency concluded with the discourse regarding Black women's experiences aspiring, ascending to, and serving in the superintendency. As a profession, the superintendency continues to be a position dominated by White males. Thus the study of the position had been more representative of White male perspectives and experiences. The review of literature revealed the paucity of research related to women and Black women in the public school superintendency. In the following section I present the conceptual framework and methods that guided my study.

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

My purpose in conducting this qualitative study was to examine how the racial and gendered identities of Black women informed their educational and professional experiences while they navigated the path to the public school superintendency. As a researcher-participant, I believed that a better understanding of how the intersection of Black women's racial and gendered identities informed their experiences while serving or aspiring to the superintendency would help us understand how Black women navigate the education profession towards the position of superintendent. This study is of interest and importance because it may contribute to current data about Black women's leadership aspirations and leadership.

The study also included Black/African American women in the discussion about school district leadership to better understand the identities *or jeopardies* (Collins, 2009; Jackson, 1999) that influence their opportunities to acquire leadership and lead as superintendents. Current empirical data is needed to reflect Black women's understanding of aspiring to the superintendency and their perceptions of the superintendency as a profession. I focused on the following research question: In what ways do the racial and gendered identities of Black women inform their educational and professional experiences along the path to the public school superintendency?

In this chapter I describe the research methods I employed in the study. Specifically, I discuss: a) the theoretical/conceptual framework, b) rationale for the chosen methods, c) overview of the research design, d) participant profiles, e) methods of data collection and analysis, f) researcher's role and biases, g) issues of trustworthiness, h) delimitations of the study, and i) a summary of the chapter.

## **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Researchers have employed a variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks in studies of Black women in school district leadership. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks for these qualitative studies have included feminist theories, Black feminist theories, critical race theories and other variations of standpoint theories. The use of these theories to ground the qualitative studies has supported the production of discourse that examined and explored the experiences of Black women leaders.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

For this study, Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) provided the theoretical/conceptual grounding. Knowledge is an important component in the social relations of domination and resistance (Collins, 2009). As such, “Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge” (p. 221). The tenets of Black feminist thought are:

- a. lived experiences as a criterion of meaning
- b. the use of dialog in assessing knowledge claims
- c. an emphasis on the ethic of caring
- d. an emphasis on the ethic of personal accountability
- e. an emphasis on positionality as an agent of knowledge, and
- f. the recognition of “truth” and the complexity of the pathway toward the truth.

(Beard, 2012, p. 62)

Collins (2009) portrayed African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals who confront race, gender, and class oppression. Afrocentric feminist thought articulates the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people.



Collins (2009) advocated for the merging of experience and consciousness in order to produce Black women's collective wisdom as foundational, for naming their experience as a criterion for meaning and as a legacy of struggle, resistance, and activism. Collins purported that the "political purpose of Black feminist thought is located within the struggle for, and the continuation of, self-definition, self-validation, and self-worth" (p. 157).

Black feminist thought supports centering the experiences of Black women leaders. Conversely, this study highlights the perspectives of Black women leaders, including my own, in an effort to center their/our educational and professional experiences as they relate to structural and everyday racial and gender oppressions. Thus Black feminist thought was an appropriate theoretical lens for this qualitative study.

According to Collins (2009), situations such as the suppression of Black women's ideas within traditional scholarship and the struggles within the critiques of that established knowledge are inherently unstable (p. 11). Collins acknowledged that Black women, as an oppressed group, have produced social thought that was designed to oppose oppression by creating counter-narratives of White men's discourse. The purpose of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different, as Collins has asserted, "Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic justice" (p. 11).

Collins (2009) asserted:

United States' Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female. For individual women, the particular

experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall. (p. 27)

The foundations of intersecting oppressions are undergirded by the concepts of oppositional difference and objectification (Collins, 2009, p.78). Objectification is a central tenet in the process of oppositional difference and controlling images. According to Gilkes (1983):

Black women's assertiveness and their use of racism to launch multiple assaults against the entire fabric of inequality have been a consistent, multifaceted threat to the status quo. As punishment, Black women have been assaulted with a variety of negative images. (p. 76)

Dominant groups manipulate ideas about Black womanhood by exploiting existing images or creating new controlling images such as stereotypes. Carby (1987) asserted that the objective of stereotypes "is not to reflect or represent reality but to function as a disguise or mystification of objective social relations" (p. 22). The image of the *Black matriarch* (Collins, 2009) appears to be a negative, controlling image used to subjugate Black women. Thus strength is a challenge to the negative image of the Black Matriarch. From the perspective of the dominant elite, the image of a *Black matriarch* refers to aggressive, assertive, or overly strong Black women. The image of the Black matriarch explained Black women's placement in intersecting oppressions.

As a stand-point theory, Black feminist thought creates a space to articulate the interlocking forms of oppression and gives voice to Black women's fight for justice (Collins, 2009). Intersecting oppressions of race and gender could not continue without

powerful ideological justifications for their existence (Collins, 2009, p. 76). The matrix of domination refers to how intersecting oppressions are organized. Collins (2009) suggested Black women are exposed to “a distinctive set of social practices that accompany our particular history within a unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions” (p. 26). Black women’s multiple identities, as Black and female, placed them at the nexus of multi-variant forms of oppression. This unique position also “stimulates a distinctive consciousness concerning these experiences and society overall” (p. 27).

Domination always involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group (Collins, 2009). In this case, the subject’s reality and identity are shaped and defined by others (bell hooks, 1989). bell hooks (1984) asserted that those who are not considered to be subjects, define their own reality and create their own identities. Domination based on *difference* is a fundamental power move in oppression.

According to Collins (2009) understanding the contours of heterogeneity and specifically how Black women can be best prepared to resist negative treatment and controlling images is a significantly important task for Black feminist thought. Historically, Black women have struggled “to form positive self-definitions in the face of derogated images of Black womanhood” (Collins, 2009, p. 102). There are three major themes associated with the ways in which Black women experience their own internalized oppression. Collins calls the first theme the suspended woman. It is related to attempts to escape negative images of Black womanhood. The second theme is the assimilated woman. This is when the Black woman denies her identity and rejects ties or connections to other Black women. The emergent woman is the third theme. It is

evidenced by Black women's resistance to controlling images and their creation of new definitions of Black womanhood.

In Black feminist thought, Black womanhood is inclusive of Black motherhood. As an institution, Black motherhood "consisted of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with Black children, with the larger African American community and with self" (Collins, 2009, p. 190). Collins asserted that motherhood can be evoked as a symbol of power for Black women whether blood mother, *other mother* or *community other-mother*. Motherhood can serve as a mechanism for Black women's self-expression as they learn the power of self-definition and can foster a belief in Black women's empowerment (Collins, 2009).

The political economy of slavery brought about profound changes in African Americans' beliefs about motherhood and the cooperative nature of child care, exemplified by *other mothering*. The traditions which characterize *community other mothering* in Black women's community work have taken different forms. Collins (2000) contended, that Black women as *community other mothers* for all Black children, often allowed Black women to treat children who were biologically unrelated as their own; thus Black women become political and social leaders.

The study of Black feminist thought (Collins 1991, 1996, 2009) is an application of intersectionality because it firmly places Black women at the center of analysis in order to study their experiences, actions and epistemologies. According to Collins (1998), the multiple aspects of identity mutually construct each other. For Black women, being female influences their experience as Black and being Black influences their

experiences as females. Therefore, there is importance for understanding the intersection of multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

### **Intersectionality**

The interpretive paradigm of intersectionality (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991) is the secondary conceptual frame that undergirds this inductive, qualitative study.

Intersectionality is based on the premise that variables, such as identities work in groups. Therefore, the focus is on the formation of social identities. This study examined race, gender, and perception of the intersection of these social constructs. Intersectionality best supported the conceptualization of the experiences of Black women superintendents and aspirants, in some cases, because it creates a frame to view race and gender influences from the participants' perspectives of their experiences.

Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality rejects the idea of a "single axis framework" and seeks to demonstrate the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape and define the multiple aspects of Black women's experiences (p. 1244). As Black feminist, Pearl Cleage (1993) contended, "we (Black females) have to see clearly that we are a unique group, set undeniably apart because of race and sex with a unique set of challenges" (p. 5). According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), Black women must consistently fight against the myth of inferiority. This population reported how difficult it is to survive in a culture that consistently stereotypes Black women as lazy, unmotivated, unattractive, and difficult to deal with (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 13).

Although intersectionality has been applied to other identities such as class or sexual identity, for this study, the theory was used to explore intersecting oppressions and

identities (Collins, 1998) related to Black women's educational and professional experiences. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) asserted that identity is formed through social interactions with others. They explained that in the workplace, informal and formal interactions with co-workers and managers, over time, shapes identity and reveals the perceptions and expectations of others. According to Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), because leadership is a social process, the formation of self-identity, social-identity and gender, and other differences may be particularly important (p. 175).

As a conceptual framework, intersectionality grounded my examination of the ways in which Black women's racial and gendered identities informed (or not) their educational and professional experiences in a public school context. The studies of barriers and challenges related to identity and identities are applied more consistently in discourse using the "interpretive paradigm of intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1991 p. 9). In this study, the conceptual frame of intersectionality was used to determine if and how, Black women superintendents and aspirants perceived their experiences as being influenced by both race and gender simultaneously in the context of the public school superintendency.

### **Rationale for Methods**

This qualitative study, in the spirit of bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001), was informed by multiple methods. The inductive approaches of qualitative interviewing, ethnomethodology, and autoethnography were selected to illuminate the educational and professional experiences of five Black women who have served, are serving, or who are aspiring to, including myself, the position of public school superintendent.

A methodological bricolage was most suited for this study in order to use the participants' own words describing what they believed to be most meaningful and important, examine the lives and *everydayness* of the participants' experiences and to place the self, as researcher at a unique vantage point in order to explore the construct of the public school superintendency. The study examined the experiences of five Black women at these three points in the superintendency position: aspiring to, practicing, and retired (or exited) from the post. The use of ethnomethodology supported examination of the superintendency as a phenomenon experienced by participants at these three specific points.

Qualitative interviewing supported exploration of the participants' perceptions of their experiences. Autoethnography permitted first person accounts from both a researcher and participant perspective, regarding aspiring to the superintendency. Kincheloe (2001) asserted that:

As researchers draw together divergent forms of research, they gain the unique insight of multiple perspectives. Thus, a complex understanding of research and knowledge production prepares bricoleurs to address the complexities of the social, cultural, psychological, and educational domains. (p .687)

To ensure sensitivity to complexity, "bricoleurs use multiple methods to: 1. uncover new insights, 2. expand and modify old principles, and 3. reexamine accepted interpretations in unanticipated contexts" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 687). Bricholeurs use any methods deemed necessary in order to gain new perspectives on objects of inquiry, as they employ the principle of difference in both research methods and cross-cultural analysis.

Kincheloe (2001) contended that a contribution of bricolage permits the exploration of different perspectives of the marginalized in relation to formations of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Young & Yarbrough, 1993). Bricolage allows the researcher to transverse into what Kincheloe (2001, p. 680) referred to as, the “more complex domain of knowledge production.” In complex knowledge production the researcher/bricoleur creates an increased awareness between interceptions, the knower and the known, the lived world, its perceptions and representation and through discourse.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), qualitative interviewing is a philosophy of learning, in that the interviewer is the student who attempts to get the participants to describe their experiences in their own terms. The interviews impose obligations on both sides. The qualitative interviewer’s “philosophy determines what is important, what is ethical, and the completeness and accuracy of the results” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 2). Qualitative interviewing provides high credibility to ensure the participants are interpreting questions in the way that they were intended, in order that the results are an accurate portrayal of the participants and make intuitive sense to the audiences (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Through the use of thick description (Geertz, 1973), the researcher/participant aimed to document a broad scope of the research participants’ educational and professional experiences to provide the readers with opportunities to enter the study and understand the participants’ multiple realities. With an emphasis on revealing the participants’ voices and establishing their narratives, “illustrative quotations” (Bloomberg



& Volpe, 2008, p. 10) derived from the interview transcripts and from the researcher's field notes, memos, and journals, are included to portray the participants' perspectives.

As Patton (2002) noted, qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the "perspectives of others are meaningful, knowable and able to be made explicit" (p. 341). In order to garner high-quality, rich information from a qualitative interview the researcher must be skilled in "the art of hearing" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 9). As an attuned listener, qualitative interviewers must have the agility to use their own knowledge, expertise, and interpersonal skills to explore unexpected ideas or themes presented by participants. The qualitative interview requires the researcher to establish trust and rapport with the participant (Alasuutari, 1998), while seeking the meaning that participants assign to their actions, which is linked to the purpose of ethnomethodology.

### **Ethnomethodology**

Ethnomethodology is an inductive, holistic, and member-centered approach originated by and identified with the American sociologist, Harold Garfinkel (1967). Ethnomethodology is a research paradigm used to examine the lives of participants and how social norms are engrained in their daily lives. The focus of study in ethnomethodology is the *everydayness* of social behaviors. Specifically, ethnomethodology is the study of how people use social interaction to maintain an ongoing sense of reality in a situation. Ethnomethodology, as its name implies, is the study of methods. According to Patton (2000):

Ethnomethodology gets at the norms, understandings and assumptions that are taken for granted by people in a setting because they are so deeply understood that

people don't even think about why they do what they do. It studies the ordinary methods that ordinary people use to realize their ordinary actions. (p. 111)

Garfinkel coined the term *ethnomethodology* in 1954 while preparing a paper describing some of his early research on juries. Garfinkel and Rawls (2002) wrote:

Ethnomethodology's fundamental phenomenon and its standing technical preoccupation in its studies is to find, collect, specify, and make the instructable observable; the local endogenous production and natural accountability of immortal familiar society's most ordinary organizational things in the world, and to provide for them both and simultaneously, as objects, and procedurally, as alternate methods. (p.124)

The knowledge that a stranger would have to learn to become a “functioning member of a group, a program or a culture” is elucidated by ethnomethodologists (Patton, 2002, p. 111). Studies incorporating ethnomethodological strategies, ask the question *how*. In-depth interviews are used to inquire about how participants interpreted their experiences. In relation to this study, ethnomethodology aligned to one of the interview questions that asked, “how participants thought that their educational and professional experiences would have been, if they were a White male, White female, or a Black male.” Additionally, the qualitative interview questions assisted in detailing how the participants understand the roles, rules, standards, and political aspects of the superintendency.

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography (Ellis, 1999), is a method used to understand one's self in deeper ways through a first-person account of events, interactions, and relationships.

Autoethnography enabled me to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) my personal experiences (auto) in order to gain an understanding of the cultural and other social dimensions (ethno) of my educational and professional experiences on the pathway of the public school superintendency. As a qualitative research approach, Patton (2000) contended, autoethnography is the self-reporting of one's own experiences and introspections as a primary data source (p. 86). Ellis and Bochner (2000) explained that with autoethnography, there is great vulnerability in revealing yourself in writing and not being able to retract what you have written nor control the readers' interpretations of your narrative.

Goodall (2000) described autoethnography as creative narratives shaped out of a writer's personal experiences within a culture and addressed to an academic and public audience (p. 9). As such, autoethnographies are written in first-person voice and appear in various forms to feature action, dialogue, emotion and self-consciousness. Ellis and Brocher (2000) warned that autoethnography is complex:

It's amazingly difficult. It's certainly not something that most people can do well.

Most social scientists do not write well enough to carry it off. Or they're not sufficiently introspective about their feelings or motives or the contradictions they experience. Ironically, many aren't observant enough of the world around them.

The self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult. (p. 738)

Inherent in the challenge of autoethnographic writing is locating and owning one's voice as it pertains to the focus of the study. Patton (2000) asserted that the use of "autoethnography increases the importance of voice and raises the stakes because an

authentic voice enhances the authenticity of the work, while an inauthentic voice undermines it” (p. 88). According to Ivanic (1988), voice reveals the author’s identity.

Although autoethnography is identified as a complex method for researchers, this method was selected because of my interests in the superintendency as an aspirant and researcher. For the purposes of this study, autoethnography was a method that would support revealing my identity as a Black women aspiring to be a superintendent, while also authenticating my voice regarding my educational and professional experiences on the pathway to the superintendency. As an aspiring superintendent, it was important for me to explore how my multiple, racial, and gendered identities have influenced my understanding of the educational and professional experiences that have occurred in my educational and work careers. Additionally, the autoethnographic accounts afforded me an opportunity to be inclusive in knowledge creation about aspiring to the superintendency, thus becoming a contributor, as well as a consumer of discourse about school district leadership.

For this study, I focused on the specific behaviors, actions, communications, and emotional explanations that my participants detailed in their qualitative interviews, to better understand how race and gendered identities influence their experiences. Borrowing from ethnomethodology as a research paradigm used to examine the lives of participants, I focused on what the participants understood to be the rules, processes, and systems of the political aspects of the superintendency. I also attended to how my participants understood their social behaviors in their educational and professional environments, as they aspired to and served as superintendents and their perspectives regarding their experiences if their racial and gendered identities were different from that

of Black and female. Autoethnography (Ellis, 1999), was employed to understand my role in a first-person account of events, interactions and relationships. Autoethnography allowed me to describe and systematically analyze my own educational and professional experiences as they related to those of my participants, and to gain an understanding of the cultural and other social dimensions of aspiring to the superintendency.

### **The Participants**

I used a purposeful sampling technique to select participants for this study in order to obtain information-rich cases (Patton, 2002) for an in-depth understanding. Information rich cases are “those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 2002, p. 46).

According to Merriam (2009), “the criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflects the purpose of the study and guides the information-rich cases” (p. 61). Selection of my participants was based on the following criteria:

1. Self-identified as Black or African American and female
2. On the path to (aspiring, and/or serving) the public school superintendency, or was a former public school superintendent, and
3. Able to recall educational and professional experiences as educators and administrators in Pre-K- 12 settings, colleges, universities, and certification and degree preparation programs.

Due to the limited number of Black women superintendents in the state of Texas, I also employed a snowball sampling strategy, sometimes referred to as network or chain sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). As there is not a specific local, state-wide, or national data-base or formal system for identifying superintendent aspirants or

their race and gender, the snowballing strategy was employed to obtain superintendent aspirants for the study. The snowballing strategy involved asking participants to recommend or nominate other individuals whom they knew to be aspiring to the superintendency or who had served in the position.

I collected data that detailed the educational and professional experiences of five participants: three Black women who are aspiring to the public school superintendency, including myself, one participant who was currently serving as superintendent, and one former public school superintendent. Given the degree of confidentiality required to protect my participants' identities, each of them was provided with a pseudonym. (See Appendix A for a summary of profiles.)

### **Participant Profiles**

#### **Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen**

Ms. Sheen, was a 62-year-old retired/former superintendent who held masters' degrees in administration and counseling and a bachelor's degree in Speech and Language communication. She also has administrator, counseling, and superintendent certifications. She earned her degrees from Texas universities and state certification boards. She served as superintendent for four years in a small rural school district in North Texas. She was the first Black superintendent and only Black female superintendent to obtain the position in the district which was comprised of predominately White student and staff demographics. The district student demographics included 73% White students, 13% Hispanic, 7% Black/African American, and 2% other. Staff demographics were 91% White, 3% Hispanic, 3% Black/African American, and 2% other.

Ms. Sheen obtained her first and only superintendent position at the end of her administrative career. She retired after 28 years of service in education. Ms. Sheen worked as a community education director prior to entering public education. Her pathway of experience in education included the following positions: superintendent, interim superintendent, special programs director, director of curriculum, principal, counselor, careers instructor at a community college, and speech and hearing therapist.

In terms of leadership roles, Ms. Sheen reported that her experience as an elementary school principal, central office special programs director, and director of curriculum prepared her for the superintendency. She reported that her role as a counselor inspired her to become an administrator. She explained that as a counselor she “wore many hats,” served on several leadership committees and became intrigued with the level of responsibility that administrators had for the futures of students and for the programs that would serve them.

She attended public elementary, middle, and high school, when schools were still segregated. She had early aspirations of being a teacher, but pursued an undergraduate major in speech and hearing therapy. She had direct contact with students and worked in public schools as a speech therapist, not as a teacher. She indicated that her early mentors were Black females. Ms. Sheen reported that she was encouraged to pursue the superintendency by her White male mentor that she had known through her professional career and she self-selected him as a mentor. At the time of this study Ms. Sheen was re-married and had two adult children.

**Current Superintendent, Roth, Ed.D.**

Dr. Roth held a doctorate of education in Administrative Leadership. She also earned the following degrees: Master of Science in curriculum and instruction, Bachelor of Science in elementary education, and an Associate of Arts degree. She had teacher, administrator, and superintendent certifications. She earned all of her certifications and degrees from institutions in Texas.

Dr. Roth had a combined seven years of experience in the superintendency at two public school districts, and a total of 26 years of experience in education. At 55 years of age, she was the superintendent of a small suburban school district in North Texas. The district's student demographics included: 41% Hispanic, 30% Black/African American, 25% White, and 4% other. The staff demographics included 77% White, 10% African American/Black, 10% Hispanic, and 1.0% other.

Dr. Roth's pathway of experience in education included the following positions: public school superintendent, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction (district level position), elementary principal, and elementary teacher. She began her educational career in 1990. Prior to entering education and obtaining a teaching certificate she spent 15 years in the daycare industry as a teacher. She obtained her bachelor's degree and taught first grade in an elementary school for six years, before returning to college to earn a Master's degree.

The year she became a principal she began her doctoral program. Dr. Roth earned her doctorate in three and a half years. She was the first African American and Black female to receive a doctorate in the program at her Texas university. She reported that her educational mentors were Black females and her professional mentors had been



White males and females. At the time of the study, Dr. Roth was remarried and had one adult daughter.

### **Aspiring Superintendent, Ms. Lakewood**

Ms. Lakewood, is a 52-year-old doctoral student who aspires to the superintendency. She has 24 years of experience in public school education. She held a Master of Arts in administration, Bachelor of Arts in elementary education, and teaching certifications in language arts and English as a second language (ESL). She earned her certifications and degrees from Texas universities.

At the time of the study she was an executive director in a large urban school district, in Texas. Prior to her career in education, Ms. Lakewood had a career in journalism and served as an adjunct professor at a Texas college. Her professional career pathway included the following positions: executive director (public school/district level position), senior director (public school/district level position), elementary and middle school principal, ESL specialist (public school/district level position), reading specialist (public school/district level position), adjunct professor, high school journalism teacher, elementary ESL teacher, and secondary English as a second language (ESL) teacher.

She had held school-based and district-level leadership roles in both public charter and traditional public school districts. Ms. Lakewood attended public and private middle and high schools. She reported that as a teacher, her mentors were Black females and as an administrator, her mentors had been White males and females. At the time of the study, she was divorced and had three adult children and one teenager.

### **Aspiring Superintendent, Ms. McNeal**

Ms. McNeal, was a 37-year-old doctoral student who was aspiring to the superintendency. She had 13 years of experience in education. Ms. McNeal held a Master of Education in educational and organizational administration, Bachelor of Arts in dance and psychology. She had teaching certifications in language arts (grades 4-8), reading (grades 4-8), and dance. She earned all of her degrees and certifications from public universities in Texas. At the time of the study she was a central office/district coordinator in a large urban school district in North Texas.

Ms. McNeal reported that she attended public middle and high schools that were comprised of predominately White student and staff demographics and high socio-economic levels. She explained that she was the only Black female student in her graduating high school class. She noted that she moved and attended several public schools during her PK-12 school years.

Prior to her career in education she was a community dance instructor, dance coordinator and public relations director. Her educational career pathway included the following positions: coordinator (district level position), middle school literacy coach, middle school vice principal, instructional facilitator (district level position), administrative intern, adjunct professor, summer school principal, and middle school English/Language Arts teacher. She reported that as a middle school teacher and middle school administrator her mentors were White, Black, and Hispanic males. Ms. McNeal was single with two sons, at the time of this study.

### **Researcher and Aspiring Superintendent, Ms. Edwards**

Ms. Edwards was a doctoral student and aspiring superintendent at the time of the study. She earned a Master of Arts in educational administration and a Bachelor of Arts in psychology. Both degrees were earned from a private, Catholic university in Texas. She earned special education teacher, administrator, supervision and superintendent certifications. She earned all of her certifications and degrees from institutions in Texas.

She had 26 years of experience in education at the time of the study. At 44, she was an assistant superintendent in a large urban school district in North Texas. She was promoted to the position of assistant superintendent at the writing of this dissertation. She received three career promotions, from principal to director, then director to executive director, and then from executive director to assistant superintendent while enrolled in her doctoral program. Mrs. Edward's pathway of professional experience in education included the following positions: assistant superintendent of school leadership (district level position), executive director of school leadership (district level position), director of special education (district level position), elementary principal, interim assistant superintendent of special education (district level position), curriculum and instruction coordinator (district level position), bilingual education coordinator, inclusion specialist (district level position), charter school principal and director, high school academic coordinating teacher/administrator, high school department chair, and high school special education teacher.

Prior to entering education and obtaining a teaching certificate she worked as a mental health specialist, lab assistant, grant writer and child care assistant. She reported that her educational mentors were Black, Hispanic, and White females and males and her

professional mentors have been White, Hispanic, and Black males, and Black and Hispanic females. She is married and has one adult daughter and two teenage sons.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

I collected data through in-person interviews and a review of archival sources. Archival data sources included resumes, public documents, such as district-websites, news stories, media releases, and Google profiles, that were accessible through online sites and from the existing literature (Wolcott, 2009) that represented the experiences of current and former superintendents. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006) for more than two hours at locations convenient to the participants. Subsequent interviews were conducted via phone and email. These post-interview conversations served as opportunities to glean clarity and pursue additional inquiries. I used an interview protocol (Appendix B) to guide the one-on-one conversations and follow-up conversations.

Access was not available to field sites because of the participants' work related schedules and confidentiality related to their work environments. Therefore, participant observations (Merriam, 2009) were not completed, as negotiated by the participants. Institutional Review Board approval was granted based on the request to obtain data through interviews and observation of the study participants in their work environments, if participants granted access to their workplaces. All participants requested that interviews be conducted at non-worksite locations. Each study participant determined the specific location for the interviews and consented to the interviews being recorded. I transcribed each interview, which yielded more than 140 pages of interview transcripts.

Ethnomethodological strategies were employed through the analysis of the behaviors, actions and communications provided by the participants during the interviews. Specifically, interview questions related to the participants' understanding of the rules, processes and systems of the superintendency. I also utilized inquiries regarding the participants' perceived perspectives of their experiences if they were a White male, White female, or Black male. The recorded interviews and transcripts served as the record for the application of ethnomethodology.

To further assist in the data collection, I used a field notebook to provide detailed accounts of the pertinent information shared during the interviews. I used the field notebook to record interview notes to assist in the development of interview transcripts and record my memos of initial thoughts and reflections about the interview data. I used a field diary to chronicle my own thinking, feelings, perspectives, and experiences throughout the data collection process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Researchers do not exist in isolation (Ellis, 2004). As a researcher-participant, I am part of numerous social networks that include a spouse, children, friends, relatives, co-workers, supervisors, students, and more. Consequently, conducting and writing research using autoethnography implicates others in the research. In using personal experience, autoethnographers not only highlight themselves with their work, but the researcher also includes information related to those who are close, or an intimate part of their lives (Adams, 2006; Etherington, 2007; Trahar, 2009). As such, confidentiality of identifiable information was maintained. I documented my experiences, as a researcher-participant, by journaling my accounts, inquiries, and wonderings in the field diary. My

field diary and field notebook memos were used for the development of my autoethnographic accounts.

### **Data Analysis**

My data collection and analysis focused on the specific educational and professional experiences of the Black women's lives and how these experiences informed their understanding of their racial and gendered identities. I used attribute coding (Saldaña, 2009) to develop a profile for each participant in the study. As I gathered data about my participants, I added the data into the corresponding profiles. This procedure assisted me in identifying additional similarities and differences in the personal characteristics and the professional and educational experiences of the participants (Saldaña, 2009).

I prepared the data collected from interviews and other sources for first cycle, open coding, and second cycle, axial coding (Saldaña, 2009). I highlighted repetitive words and phrases within the text that could serve as codes. This process was done to glean ideas about the direction of the study, its progression, and the codes I would be using in analysis. Additionally, this open-coding process helped me sort the data into groups and codes. I divided a page into three separate columns: The first column for raw data, the second for preliminary codes, and the third column for final codes. After reflecting upon the preliminary codes for a given stanza or block of raw data that I selected, I used axial coding to create a strong and encompassing final code by having the guiding research question for this study in front of me (Saldaña, 2009).

Saldaña (2009) recommended that the researcher ask “am I making new discoveries, insights, and connections about [my] participants, their processes, or the

phenomenon under investigation?” (p. 51). This question served as a further filter to generate the codes with the most potential to answer my central research question, as I transitioned to other cycles of coding my data. In addition to the systemic coding process, I used autoethnographic inquiry to reflect upon my beliefs and experiences using myself as the object of study (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

Specifically, to develop my autoethnographic accounts, I used the participants’ responses to the questions to reflect on my own personal experiences as these related to their reports. I included my perspectives about my experiences based on the categories and themes that emerged from the data. Additionally, I used the literature reviewed about Black women superintendents to develop components of some of my autoethnographic accounts.

### **Researcher Roles and Bias**

As the researcher, I collected data through reflexivity, reflective journaling, and collecting and analyzing data and select artifacts. I analyzed data to identify themes related to race, gender and the intersectionality of race and gender in some of my own experiences of the career path to the public school superintendency, which might influence the presentation of my study.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness, also called research credibility (Glesne, 2006), was developed through peer review. I solicited a review of the data or a peer review (Merriam, 2009) from my colleagues in order to establish trustworthiness. Additionally, participants were asked to review the transcripts of their respective interviews and conversations (member checking), prior to the submission of my final study. This review allowed the

participants the opportunity to check my transcriptions for clarity. Member checking also supported further data collection and confirmation of the participants' data, which included their direct quotations and summarized data.

The narrative truth or trustworthiness of autoethnography is based on what a story of experience does for the writer-researcher, participants, and audiences (Denzin, 1989). Additionally, the credibility of an autoethnography is related to how the story is used and understood and responded to by the writer-researcher, participants, and audiences (Denzin, 1989) so that the reader better understands the content and context. Glesne (2006) suggested that a component of demonstrating the trustworthiness of one's data is to be knowledgeable of the limitations or delimitations of the study.

### **Delimitations**

This study involved only a small number of participants. Some of the delimitations of the study included resources and access to the other Black women school district leaders who were aspiring to the superintendency and those who had served in the position of superintendency. Specifically, the sample size of African American women superintendents was limited. A review of the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators and the Texas Education Agency School District Superintendent directories only yielded nine Black female superintendents at the time the study was initiated. According to Brunner and Kim (2010) the number of women aspiring to the superintendency and seeking the credentials for the position is greater than the number of superintendents. However, there is not a national or state-wide data base that documents superintendent aspirants. Thus, identification of aspiring superintendents and access to this cadre of educational leaders was also limited.



A second delimitation was not generalizing the study's findings to other women of color, males, and/or Black males. Comparing the educational and professional experiences of Black females to other female leaders, other minority leaders and Black men, may be of interest and need. However, this was not the intent of this inquiry.

A final delimitation was that the study bore from the lens of an individual researcher with multiple identities and a Black feminist perspective. Therefore, it was important in conducting this qualitative study, to identify prejudices and biases from my own experiences and life history. Identification of these biases, informed the reader of the lens and the filter that I used to interpret and analyze the data. During the analysis of the data, I remained cognizant of personal prejudices and biases related to my own racial and gendered identities, cultural influences, and experiences as a Black woman.

#### **IV. ANALYSIS OF DATA**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the educational and professional experiences of Black women who are on the career path of the public school superintendency. Aligned with the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought, this section consolidates the experiences of Black women for analysis. This chapter presents key insights derived from four in-depth interviews, with the participants and the autoethnographic accounts of myself, a Black woman aspiring to the position of public school superintendent. Key insights that emerged from this qualitative study clustered around these three themes:

1. Perceptions of identity and identities: motivators and inhibitors
2. Non-traditional and non-linear educational and career pathways
3. Experience of difference: diversity, struggle, and activism

The overall research question guiding this study was: In what ways do the racial and gender identities of Black women inform their educational and professional experiences on the path to the public school superintendency?

The analytic themes are aligned with the study's research question. Similar categories were used to code the data and organize the presentation of the study's insights in the previous chapter. The first level of analysis involved connecting the patterns both within and between analytic categories. The second level of analysis included use of the theoretical framework and literature to compare and contrast the themes with the literature.

The serendipitous, dynamic, and evolving nature of qualitative research lends itself to unexpected insights related to themes. Following is a discussion of the themes,

with specific data and details, that explain and support each. Where appropriate, the researcher's autoethnographic accounts are woven in with interview data to enhance and solidify the discussion of the insights and themes.

### **Theme 1: Perceptions of Identity and Identities: Motivators and Inhibitors**

The central and prevailing theme of this study is that the participants revealed their racial and gendered identities and how these constructs were perceived. Being both Black and female are the intersecting social constructs that define Black women's multiple identities and the inherent challenges associated with the intersection of their race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). The participants provided examples of how they perceived their identities, how they perceived the identities of others, and how others perceived the participants' identities.

The contributors cited educational and professional experiences in which they were aware of their racial and gendered identities. However, they did not consistently report that race and gender as intersectional. They did not interpret the simultaneity, or the multiplicity of their race and gender, in all experiences that were shared. Nevertheless, this theme is still highly significant because participants recalled how experiences related to their racial and gendered identities served as motivators or inhibitors in their educational and professional careers. The participants' experiences were significant enough to document because two of these women eventually acquired a position as a superintendent while the others are still on the pathway toward the superintendency.

## Intersectional Identities

The idea of *intersectionality* aligns with the views of intersecting racial and gendered oppressions held by Black women. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal scholar, coined the term intersectionality, which has had a particular interest in the intersection of race and gender. Intersectionality supports the analysis of “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s...experiences” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244).

Collins, scholar and author of Black feminist thought, provided perspective regarding racist and sexist ideologies, as she wrote:

In U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. Negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women’s oppression. (Collins, 2009, p.7)

Former superintendent, Ms. Sheen, recalled an educational experience while she was in college, in which the intersectionality of her identities as a Black, and as a female, appeared to be at work. Ms. Sheen responded to a casting call for a college portrayal of the screen play, *The Miracle Worker*. She recounted how:

I had a flair for the dramatic. I was in a lot of plays and I did a lot of public speaking, and won University Interscholastic League (UIL) contests, which at that time were at P.V. (University), where the Black University Interscholastic League (UIL) experiences were. But I loved speech and drama, loved doing speeches and loved poetry

and all that kind of stuff. When I went to the University of N.T. there was a production of *The Miracle Worker* that they were casting for. And I decided to try out for it. I was cast as one of the maids, though I really wanted the role of Annie (Anne Sullivan, the teacher), the therapist in that story. And, I did not take it. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

Ms. Sheen anticipated being casted for the part of the heroine, Ms. Sullivan, the teacher of Helen Keller, a student who was both blind and deaf. To her surprise, Ms. Sheen was cast as a maid in the play. She refused the role of the maid, in essence challenging her subordination and resisted perpetuating the controlling image and stereotype of a Black woman as a *Mammy*. She reported how she used this educational experience of racial and gender oppression as a motivator to inform her professional identity. She reported that she intentionally pursued the racially-segregated professional field of speech and language therapy and became a Speech and Language therapist.

She explained:

I thought I was good enough to get selected, ‘Why wasn’t I good enough to play the role of the teacher, Helen Keller’s teacher, her therapist?’ I just decided not to be in it at all. And then, [I] chose a career of speech therapy for my own, and decided, I can be that teacher in a lot of other kids’ lives. From a very early start in my education, issues of race helped to shape the direction that I went. At the time, this was in 1963, there were not a lot of Black Speech and Hearing Therapists. I felt myself kind of blazing a trail there. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

Ms. Sheen used this experience of racial and gendered oppression, which could have been an inhibitor, as a motivator for her career pursuits. She intentionally pursued a career that had been limited for Black women.

Dr. Roth revealed an experience she had with perceptions of her leadership as a Black female superintendent. Superintendent Roth identified her race and gender as factors contributing to negative stereotypes and perceptions. She noted:

People will tell you, you are experiencing these things with these people because you're a Black woman with a doctorate degree, in the highest position in the city. You're the superintendent of the schools. You're the supervisor of the largest entity in the city. They say, 'I'm telling you this, but don't say my name; because I live with these people, we are friends with these people. But we see the good in what you're doing. We need you. You've helped our schools move forward. But, this is why you're experiencing what you're experiencing.'

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth explained that some of the experiences that she had while serving as superintendent in a rural school district were related to the simultaneity of her race and gender. Another participant revealed a similar experience with racial and gender stereotypes.

Aspirant McNeal shared an early educational experience in which she believed her identity as a Black female caused her to be stereotyped as a "challenged student." She reported that she was the only Black female in the school that had a predominately White student population and faculty. She also explained that she was the daughter of a single

mother. She described how her teachers' perceptions of her as a Black female from a single-parent household, resulted in negative stereotyping. She stated:

I think that the mind-sets and heart-sets of educators at that time, knowing that my Mom was single, there was that perception that I might not be a knowledgeable student because of my mother's status. Another thing that might, have contributed to this mindset, up until 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I did not attend the same school. And so, that could also have contributed to this mindset that I couldn't be smart or that I was going to have emotional or social problems. I didn't have those problems in middle school and high school. I loved school. I excelled in school. I was very involved and popular. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal described how the teachers' application of negative stereotypes about young Black females, especially those from single parent households, created what she termed, their "mindsets and heart-sets." According to McNeal, the teachers thought that she was a student with "challenges" such as social-emotional deficits and academic problems. She explained that because she was the daughter of a single Black female, the educators stereotyped her as an "at-risk" student. She resisted and overcame the stereotypes used by the teachers to identify her as an at-risk student with academic, social, and emotional issues. She appeared to have used this experience which could have inhibited her achievement, as a motivator for her educational pursuits.

Aspirant Lakewood provided her insights about the image of Black women as threats. She reported how oppression manifests as an image of threat applied to Black women. Further, aspirant Lakewood's expressions demonstrated how oppression, based

on the image of Black women as threats, works to regulate Black women's behavior and suppress or inhibit their advancement. She told of how:

I realized that, African American women are, no matter what background they have, no matter what they have to bring to the table, they tend to be lumped into one category. And that category, at least where I am today is 'threatening.' I think, no matter who we are and how far we get, people tend to see us as a threat. How does that manifest? It depends on the person. It either manifests with them making sure that you don't progress or get ahead, or it manifests by them bullying and putting you down, it manifests by them being jealous, it manifests by them thinking you're awesome and they move you ahead. But for the most part, I see people as trying to squash who we are because they are worried about how far we can go. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood explained that Black women's strength and potential for success appeared to be the basis for the identification of Black women as threat. She further explained her understanding of the image of the Black woman as a threat because of the strength that she believed Black women display. Aspirant Lakewood explained how the identification of Black women as a threat, in fact threatens the status quo.

She stated:

The fact that we've been brought here against our will, the fact that we are survivors. The fact that we can take a family without a man and get a child who can get a 740 on SAT, get a lawyer, and a teacher. I think that's a threat to a lot of people. And I think it's a threat to males. And we (Black women) don't really



recognize how much our strength alienates people, but also scares them very much. (Aspirant Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Strength is denoted as a negative aspect or identity of the Black matriarch (Collins, 2009). However, Aspirant Lakewood's experience suggested that she perceived her strength as a positive attribute, while others perceived this attribute as a negative characteristic. She appeared to be motivated by the idea of Black women's strength, although she associated this strength with the image of threat. While this image of Black women as threats could be an inhibitor, it appeared that Aspirant Lakewood used the image and stereotype as a motivator in her professional and educational experiences.

Superintendent Roth described her internal struggle to counteract simultaneous racial and gendered stereotypes, when she stated:

In my mind, I kept saying times have changed and what's race got to do with it? I'm a leader, I'm degreed, there shouldn't be anything about being a woman or being Black. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth's internal struggle appeared to have been related to her understanding of her intersectional identities that prompted external stereotypes when she was the first Black, female superintendent in a school district with predominately White demographics. She believed that her credentials and leadership experience would counter-act racial and gendered stereotypes. This internal struggle served as a motivator for her leadership pursuits and practice.

While White women and Black women may confront negative gender stereotypes, "women of color most often have to attend to all of the areas of minority difference for them and how these sources of identity influence their struggle to achieve

success and feel comfortable in majority dominated organizations” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p.173). Aspirant Lakewood expressed how her identity influenced her struggle when she stated, “You’re not given a clean slate. It’s like, you walk in and there’s already something written on your page, and they’re just looking for ways to confirm.” Aspirant Lakewood’s statement seemed to refer to her struggle to obtain a clean slate for access to success. She also appeared to identify her struggle to combat negative stereotypes that are inherent in the marginalization of Black women.

Ah Nee-Benham and Cooper (1998) asserted that one of the “key challenges for Black women superintendents is their struggle to counteract negative stereotypes, institutional barriers, and marginalization” (p.87). Similar stereotypes have been applied to other Black women, with the intent to marginalize and oppress. It appeared that these Black women’s experiences of intersectional racial and gendered stereotypes and other forms of oppression exert a more powerful influence on the way that Black women’s multiple identities inform their educational and professional experiences on the path to the public school superintendency.

### **Reactions to Controlling Images**

Collins identifies three reactions that some Black women may display in response to oppression and controlling images. These responses are (a) the suspended woman, (b) the assimilated women, and (c) the emergent woman. While not all of the participants shared experiences that could be related to each of these reactions, the experiences of two participants could be associated with these reactions to controlling images.

**The suspended woman.** According to Collins, the literature by U.S. Black women, describes the theme of the suspended woman as one in which the Black woman’s

lived experiences are filled with pain, violence, and even death. Collins (2009) indicates that the suspended woman “attempts to escape from a world predicated upon derogated images of Black womanhood” (p.102). These women are suspended in time and place and their life choices are limited as they view themselves through the lens of the image of White women. Aspirant McNeal detailed an experience that appeared to be aligned with the suspended woman. She stated:

Unfortunately, it [not having the right body type or an Anglo female body type for dance] was negative, as much as I tried to put those things in the back of my mind and not allow that to hinder me being confident in myself and in my body type. But it [body type/image] did have a negative impact because it was constantly a struggle in knowing that there was a narrow focus within that profession [dance]. I did deal with it negatively and I had an eating disorder for a while and had to deal with that.

She continued:

But, at the same time, I still I had to really focus on my technical development so that I could, even though that [body] might have been the first thing that they saw. [They] could see; she has the long legs, but a short torso, but she has the height. I had to really focus on the technical development of my skills, so that [body type/image] wouldn't be the focus and they could focus on my skills. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 30, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal's educational experience that appeared to be aligned with the

suspended woman exemplified the challenges related to this type of reaction to controlling images. However, her experience appeared to be transformed from an inhibitor to a motivator as she advanced her technical dance skills.

**The assimilated woman.** Another reaction to controlling images involves the assimilated woman. Denial of her identity as a Black woman and rejection of connections to other Black women are characteristics of the assimilated women (Collins, 2009). These women are more aware of their condition than are the suspended women, as the assimilated woman sees herself as misplaced by time and circumstances. Although Ms. Lakewood didn't deny her identity, she did articulate how her physical attributes, speech patterns, and professional record were more aligned to those of White women. She explained:

They looked at my color [skin color], they looked at my speech [proper articulation], they looked at my record, [record of professional and educational accomplishment], my resume and they kind of want to give me a little bit more credit. They think of me as not the typical African American. I'm more atypical or I am the exception. And so I think they tend to give me a little more, maybe credence. I think most of my bosses have been really fair with me. Once I prove myself, I'm fine. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 30, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood's perceptions of herself as an "atypical" Black woman, because of her fair-colored skin and well-articulated speech, appeared most associated with the assimilated woman. She didn't deny her identity or disassociate herself as a Black woman. However, she did explain that her professional record, physical appearance and speech articulation were "atypical" to those of some Black women.

**The emergent woman.** Black women's resistance to controlling images is typified by the emergent woman. Emergent Black women "carve out new definitions of Black womanhood" (Collins, 2009, p.104). According to Collins, Black women become emergent women by changing their expectations about their femininity. Additionally, emergent Black women survive the everyday assaults associated with controlling images by "tuning it out," "the moment when silence becomes speech, when stillness becomes action" (Collins, 2009, p.106). Aspirant Lakewood reported an experience that appeared to be aligned to the emergent woman. She explained:

My main racial things or issues as far as professionally, has come from some women who think that I am...or maybe perceive me as being too strong and arrogant and not having humility. For example, when I was a Reading Language Arts Specialist, my boss was Hispanic and her second in command was also Hispanic, both [were] females. I was very passionate about kids and reading. I walked in one day and they had the low-leveled readers in a garage [a renovated garage] which used to be the automotive department for the high school.

She continued:

It was cold, the steel doors were still there, and one of the students turned to me and said, 'Miss, can you help us, I'm cold?' I got so angry. I went to see the principal. She was sitting in a very warm office, and so I said, 'Why should these kids be down there in the cold, when you're sitting in a warm office? Maybe you can loan them your office so that they can, you know, be in an environment where they're more likely to learn.' That [Lakewood's comments] got back to my boss somehow, and they said I was arrogant. At that point, I realized that if people

think that the low-leveled readers ought to be in the basement, in a cold garage, then maybe this isn't the place for me. They said I was arrogant, to me that was saying, implying, or employing a racist kind of view or perception onto me, that Black women are arrogant. I've had several instances where I've had to tone it down. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 30, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood's experience seemed to be aligned with the reaction of the emergent woman because she was cognizant of the controlling image or behavioral expectations. However, she responded with actions and communications that were not expected. The experience that Aspirant Lakewood shared appeared to be a form of her use of voice and actions to 'turn it out' in order to oppose controlling images related to her racial and gendered identities.

### **Racial and Gendered Identities**

Collins (2009) suggested controlling images are constructed to make racism and sexism appear as normal and natural occurrences of everyday life. The participants also recalled experiences that they related to either their racial or gendered identities. These experiences of racial and gendered bias and stereotypes could have served as inhibitors for the participants. However, it appeared that the participants used these experiences to motivate them in their professional and educational pursuits.

Superintendent, Dr. Roth, provided an example of her will and ability to attain the superintendency despite her supervisor's attempt to discourage her because she was a woman. She recounted a professional experience in her pursuit of the superintendency wherein she was informed by a White male superintendent that women were not being hired for the position. She said:

This is what I did when I had my mind set on becoming a superintendent. The superintendent I worked for said one day, ‘Now, they’re not hiring women now.’ We’re in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and you’re telling me, nobody’s hiring a woman to be a superintendent? That’s wrong, that greatly influenced me. After about four interviews, I became a superintendent. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

It appeared that Dr. Roth’s identity as a female, subjected her to what she perceived to be a gender-biased comment. Instead, she rejected this bias and used the experience as motivation to energize her for her ascension to the superintendency.

Superintendent Roth reported another experience with sexism. She stated:

One [superintendent position] I thought I had and the head hunters [search firm] said, ‘You’re number one, get ready.’ The next day, they had already changed their minds. I didn’t lose it [superintendent position] to a White male or White female, I lost the job to a Black male, an interim [superintendent] who was already there [in the district]. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth expressed shock and disbelief that she didn’t get the job when she was deemed the front-runner for the position, but she appeared more perplexed that the position was obtained by a Black man. She did not explain if she believed her race or her gender had implications for the decision recommended by the search firm and adopted by the board. Hence the assertions of Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) were confirmed. It seems Black women are too different from Black men to experience the benefit of their shared race.

One of the participants, aspirant Lakewood, also provided a recollection of how she was subjected to gendered oppression in the form of stereotyping, as an early high school graduate. She reported that her high school counselor had stereotyped her as a future nurse or clerical worker; occupations that she considered appropriate for women. According to Ms. Lakewood, the counselor was negligent in providing her the necessary guidance and support to complete college entrance exams. Aspirant Lakewood's opportunity to gain entrance to scholarships and colleges of her choice were limited by the inaction of her counselor, who stereotyped her because of her gender. She recalled:

What was interesting, was when I went to the high school counselor to schedule my time to take the SAT and ACT, she looked at me and said, 'Why, because secretaries and nurses don't need to take the SAT or the ACT.' I just told her she needed to schedule me to take the tests. I took the tests. For someone who hadn't studied for it, didn't know it, and didn't know what was on it, I did very well, especially taking it [college entrance exams] a year earlier than I was supposed to. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood demonstrated assertiveness and agency in ensuring her chance to take the college entrance exams, in spite of the counselor's attempt to use what was interpreted, by Ms. Lakewood, as gender stereotypes, to guide her career aspirations. While the counselor's action could have served as an inhibitor, Ms. Lakewood's understanding of the associated benefits of completing the college entrance exams motivated her to successful performance on these tests. Aspirant Lakewood's actions appeared to be a form of resistance to oppression that she did attribute to her gender. She used the experience to motivate her and demonstrate self-advocacy.



Aspirant Lakewood also described an oppressive professional experience that she viewed was a result of her race. She stated:

As a curriculum developer, there was one male, all the rest were females, one African American, that was me. One Asian (female), I remember that, because the Asian (female) with less experience was promoted. That was one reason why I decided to look for another job. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

It appeared that aspirant Lakewood's experience was related to oppression which she perceived was based on her race, although she did not expound upon the intersectionality of her racial and gender identities. This participant's experience was similar to those shared by other participants, which aligned with the literature related to negative stereotypes assigned to Black women (Collins, 2009). Aspirant Lakewood also reflected her view of the presumed qualities and negative stereotypes assigned to Black women in professional contexts because of race when she said:

People look at me and because I'm African American, they attach certain stereotypes or perceptions to me, that I'm loud, I'm rude, I'm confrontational, that I don't communicate well. The fact that they would even, draw a conclusion...that communication is a problem that continues to crop up. I think it's just something that they use, as a way to dilute my effectiveness or my ability to do my job well or my performance. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood's thoughts about the purpose of racial stereotypes appeared to be associated with justifications for oppression. These justifications, then, appeared to become motivators for the participants to resist controlling negative images. According to Collins (2009), negative and *controlling images* have cast Black women as

stereotypical mammies and matriarchs to justify oppression. These controlling images are created to make racism and sexism and other variations of injustice appear normal and inevitable in everyday life (p. 77).

### **Resisting Negative Images and Survival Strategies**

According to Collins (2009), “the significance of the hegemonic domain of power lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols and ideologies” (p. 304). Ideas matter, thus, Black women’s reclaiming of the power of the mind is a form of resistance to negative ideologies and images. As suggested by Collins, “the hegemonic domain becomes a critical site for not just fending off hegemonic ideas from the dominant culture, but in crafting counter-hegemonic knowledge that fosters changed consciousness” (p. 304).

Challenging the controlling images of the Black matriarch and the mammy (mammification) are central themes of Black feminist thought. These stereotypical images of Black womanhood have significant meaning for the participants’ identities. Ms. Sheen’s pursuit of the role of the teacher (Anne Sullivan) and her refusal to accept the role of the maid suggests her actions toward defining her own identity as an educator, not as a maid. She recalled her thoughts about the importance of teachers in her segregated school.

Ms. Sheen said:

I attended schools, when schools were segregated. So teachers were such an important...they were such an important group in our community. I was really a part of a generation, where many of my group of classmates and friends had parents who dropped out of school, very, very young if they had ever gone. Many

had parents that could not read very well; that was just my era. Then, when I started school, the teachers were, they were just a very symbolically important group and I always wanted to be like them. I wanted to talk like them. I wanted to dress like them. I wanted to be like them. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

Former superintendent, Ms. Sheen, spoke of her understanding of teachers in her school during a period of school segregation. She reported that teachers were viewed as a symbolically important group whom she desired to emulate.

In Ms. Sheen's case, she perceived herself as a teacher, even though the teacher (Anne Sullivan) was actually a White female, and was depicted as such in the play, *The Miracle Worker*, for which she had auditioned during college. Ms. Sheen's pursuit of a role that was associated with that of a White female educator appeared to relate to her experience of admiration for teachers because of the stature they had in her segregated school.

According to Collins (2009), "negative stereotypes applied to Black women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression" (p. 7). I wondered if and how Black women's competence, confidence, courage, and capabilities as educational leaders had been transformed into the negative stereotypes and controlling images that created the conceptualization of Black women as assertive, threatening opponents to those who dominate and control access to the superintendency.

As I explored the ideas of controlling images and stereotypes of Black women, I was compelled to acknowledge the participants' thoughts and actions that demonstrated their resistance to these negative images, and the social forces behind them, which, in

turn, produced positive images and counter-narratives. I considered the fact that I was completing and participated in research that included my experiences and those of other Black women who aspire to and have attained the superintendency, a position that has historically been occupied almost exclusively by White men. The participants' pursuit of, and ascension to, the superintendency, appeared to be forms of resistance to the social construction of controlling images and the oppression associated with the suppression of Black women and their thoughts.

Black women, pursuing and attaining the superintendency, threaten the *Matrix of Domination*. According to Harris (2007), racial and gender oppressions cause Black women "to develop and use survival strategies in a system designed to help us fail" (p. 60). Harris (2007) noted that some examples of the strategies employed by Black women in predominately White institutions, include, *over preparation* and *citing credentials*.

These strategies are taken by Black women as a means to ensure that they are more prepared than their peers, and detail their earned degrees, licensures, and experience. In Collins' (2009) text, Black feminist poet, Audre Lorde (1984) asserts that the survival strategy of "watching" involves Black women "becoming familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor" (p. 114). The participants here, revealed how racial and gender oppression prompted them to employ the survival strategies asserted by Lorde and Harris, such as over preparing, citing credentials, and watching.

Superintendent Roth shared an experience in which she over-prepared in order to over-achieve on a project during her preparation for the principalship and superintendency. She also explained how she worked to be skilled at speaking credibly among men, as she employed Lorde's watching strategy. Dr. Roth's use of these

strategies helped support her survival in what she thought were the racial and gendered oppressive environments of educational leadership. She told how:

You listen to certain men, and it was often, back then, the White men who sounded like they had all the business sense in the world. You could be afraid of that and intimidated, or you could push yourself to learn what they knew. Instead of being intimidated, I pushed myself to learn more. I did several projects as opposed to doing just one. I wanted to learn more than what was expected. I knew I needed to compete with anyone I was up against. So I think when you look at race and gender, being able to stand among men and speak the language of education was one thing that I wanted to do. This is what I did when I had my mind set on becoming a superintendent. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Superintendent Roth appeared to employ survival strategies in response to the potential of intimidation that occurred in a White male-dominated educational context. Instead, she was motivated to learn what they knew and exceed them in educational leadership preparation expectations.

Aspirant McNeal described similar strategies in establishing her credibility and ability to compete with her male and White peers during her educational career. She indicated that her pursuit of a doctorate degree was partially due to the credibility and respect she received in educational contexts. She said:

I had to be better and to compete amongst my classmates to be recognized for my abilities. I think that had a lot to do with shaping me and my thinking, knowing that I can't just get a Bachelors, I needed a Masters' as well. And then even now,

in order for me to move and be credible or be considered credible and respected in this business. I need an advanced degree, to get my doctorate. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal further explained her ideas about credibility and respect in White male dominated contexts. She specifically referred to the idea of competing against men because of perceptions that a man's job performance is better than a woman's. She also used this perception to further detail her understanding of the need and requirement to produce credible work. She recalled how:

I've got to compete against men because they are always considered the ones that can do the job better than a woman could. But there is still some type of mindset and attitude present in today's society, unfortunately when it comes to men and women, when it comes to being a minority versus an Anglo person. I have learned that my work is going to have to be credible. You're going to have to be credible. Your peers are going to have to see you and respect you and know that you're qualified and you have the ability to do what is necessary... and what's called upon for you to do. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal referred to a mindset that appeared to be related to higher credibility assigned to males and White professionals. Her perception of these mindsets appeared to motivate her to produce credible work and aim to gain respect from her professional peers.

Aspirant Lakewood explained that Black women have unique experiences. She asserted that as educational and aspiring leaders, Black women should develop images

and understand the dynamics of engaging networks. Lakewood's assertion appeared to be a type of survival strategy for Black women leaders. She said:

Recognize that African American women have unique experiences, not singular experiences. African American women, who seek leadership, need to develop image, identity perceptions, know how to network, how to engage the room, what they bring to the table. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 30, 2013)

She continued:

[Black women should] ask good questions, learning when to speak and listening. We interrupt, stop conversations, and in professional settings we want to do the same. African Americans are taught that questioning is bad, labeled as confrontational, but that [questioning] is part of the dialogue. In families where conversations look like arguments, this is about engaging in the conversation. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 30, 2013)

The participants' experiences of the matrix of domination led them to develop and employ survival strategies to transcend the racial and gendered oppressions inherent in the matrix. Participants employed the strategy of over preparing as a method, or social behavior, to maintain sense of their reality. The participants' implementation of these survival strategies are the social interactions that are related to the ethnomethodological aspects of this study.

In the participants' experiences, they demonstrated their resistance to oppressions by "doing something that was not expected" (Collins, 2009, p. 108). These Black women pursued and ascended to the superintendency despite racial and gender-based oppressions. Their experiences demonstrated their self-defined consciousness (Collins,

2009). This self-defined consciousness appeared to support the participants' resistance, and instead acted as motivators.

### **Autoethnographic Account: Resisting Peer Oppression**

As Collins (2009) asserted, "intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (p. 21). The participants provided revelations regarding their experiences with the intersecting oppressions of their race and gender in both educational and professional contexts. Their revelations allowed me as a researcher-participant, to draw some parallels to my own experiences with the intersectionality associated with specific forms of race and gender oppression. As I reviewed my field-notes, I was specifically struck by Aspirant Lakewood's conceptualization of the Black woman's image as a threat. She stated:

I think African American women have the most potential, and we have the most awesomeness. And it's because of what we've been through. Just the fact that our grandmothers or great grand-mothers were slaves and the stories they told us.  
(Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Specifically, I was interested in how this image of threat was intrinsically linked to both race and gender. I recalled my own experience with a professional colleague who articulated concerns with my assertiveness. In her view, I was too aggressive and unprofessional. This colleague, a White female, expressed concern because I refused her demand to relinquish facilitation of a high profile project. I explained to her that I had already worked on the project and brought it to completion, so I wasn't going to release my work so that she could claim credit for my efforts.



She stated that my response was overly aggressive and did not align with our collaborative norms. She also added that I did not need to respond to her in this manner. My refusal to relinquish the project, for which I had completed the majority of the work, led to my colleague perceiving me as aggressive, overly assertive, and non-collaborative. As I reflected on this experience with a White female colleague I understood that my identity as a both a woman, and specifically a Black woman, were intrinsically linked to my colleague's perception of me. I believe that my colleague's response to my assertiveness was an attempt to control and oppress me. She pointed out she had not had any issues of "sharing the credit" when she worked with our other colleagues (a White female and a Hispanic female). I resisted her attempt and maintained control of the project and my positive image as an assertive Black woman.

### **Ethnomethodology: Perceptions of Others' Identities**

To glean a deeper understanding of how the participants' racial and gendered identities informed their experiences, participants were asked if they believed their experiences would have been different if they had been a White male, White female, or a Black male. All participants communicated their surprise and shock that these questions were posed. They reported that they had not given significant thought about how their educational and professional experiences would have been different, if their racial and gendered identities were different.

Most participants indicated that they believed some aspects of their experiences would have been different if they were identified as White men. Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, reflected on the question related to her perspectives regarding her experiences if she were a White male. She stated:

I probably wouldn't have run into those problems with the superintendent, had I been a White male. I think there would have been less thinking; 'I'm not sure she can handle this,' had I been a white male. My own thinking would have been different, it wouldn't have occurred to me to shy away from applying for the job of superintendent, had I been a White male. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

According to Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), "stereotypes can affect self-perceptions as well as the perceptions of others" (p.173). In this case, Ms. Sheen's racial and gendered identities influenced her perception of White men as confident and privileged. Her perceptions of White men appear to contrast with negative stereotypes of Black women and her own self-perception.

Aspirant McNeal expressed similar thoughts about the potential difference in her experiences if she were a White male or a White female. She explained:

It appeared, in my perception, it looked easier for an Anglo female and Anglo males. It looked easier, it just did. (Aspirant McNeal, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal's perception that the experiences of both White men and White women are relatively easier than Black women's experiences, suggested that her intersectional identities impacted her perceptions of racial and gendered others.

While the participants were clearly conscious of oppressions related to the intersectionality of their race and gender identities when referring to White males, not all participants expressed the same sentiments when referring to the experiences of White females. This factor could be explained by Steele and Aronson's (1995) assertion that

stereotypes can similarly affect women and women of color because of the influence these stereotypes have on perceptions and the elicitation of stereotype threats.

When discussing her perspectives about whether her experiences would have been different if she were a White woman, Superintendent Dr. Roth explained:

I think when you look at White women in powerful leadership positions, who have been successful, perhaps, I don't know. I say that because I watched a woman who I thought would get a certain position at the drop of a hat. But that person wasn't even considered, and she was a White woman. I thought she would be given a position. And she wasn't even interviewed. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth's understanding of sexism imposed upon a White woman appears to align with gender stereotypes that affect the perceptions of women as leaders.

### **Ethnomethodology: Perceptions of Politics**

Collins (2009) indicates that identity politics is a way of knowing in which lived experiences are important and central to creating knowledge and crafting group-based knowledge. The public school superintendency is a political position. Black female superintendents they must navigate the landscape of identity politics and position politics.

The participants were asked to share their perspectives regarding the politics associated with the public school superintendency to glean an understanding regarding their perceptions of the impact of their identities and politics of the position. Former Superintendent Sheen and Superintendent Roth both shared their experiences with identity politics in the superintendency. They also articulated specific strategies that they employed to navigate the politics of the position and the related identity politics.

Ms. Sheen shared her thoughts about her decision to pursue the superintendency in a district with predominately White demographics. She appeared to be cognizant of the identity politics and position politics that she would need to mitigate in the role. She recounted how:

I'm a female and I'm a black female and N. D. (school district) is 90% White, and there had never been a female superintendent. At the time there was not a single other Black professional level employee in the district. At the time that I was there, there were not any other Black professionals. Now, there were paraprofessionals, and some custodial and so forth, but at the time that I was there, there was not another Black professional. I thought at this stage in my career, am I ready to bump my head up against this wall. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

Ms. Sheen pursued and obtained the superintendency, understanding that identity politics would be a challenge. Superintendent Roth detailed her experience with identity politics while fulfilling her role as a public school superintendent. Superintendent Roth asserted:

The politics come into play when superintendents lean more to one side than another. If you are a man and you lean toward all of the men, and never address the women, that's a problem. If you are a woman and you lean toward all of the women, and never address the men, that's a problem. If you are Black and lean toward the Blacks and never address the Whites, then that's a problem and vice versa. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Ms. Sheen also recalled her experiences with the politics of the public school

superintendency. She explained:

I know that there is some posturing that has to be done in terms of what you sense or believe needs to happen in the district, and what the board senses and believes, and so, trying to get them inside your vision enough, so that you're not fighting each other at every turn, is very, very important and its lot of political posturing. You learn the art of understatement because overstatement or even a direct statement often ends up being combative, so you learn the art of understatement. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

She added:

And you learn the art of getting them inside of "the ends" of what your vision will produce. Because that's the best way to get them to the steps toward it, but the steps toward it (vision) they don't always see and understand the steps to get here. I don't know any school district anywhere that doesn't have somewhere as it's end goal, the education of students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and all of the wording that we put on that, but how you get there and the practices you put in place for the district are the parts that are hard to negotiate. Because those tried and true practices and curricula are and programs have become the traditions of the district, sometimes work against, getting over here. How you shift that, it's the whole process of change, it is hard. It is very, very difficult. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

Ms. Sheen shared her strategy of using change processes for mitigating the politics of the superintendency. Dr. Roth identified the political structures of the

superintendency and her use of influence with her school board trustees/representatives to navigate the politics of the position. She said:

The politics are created because of the structure. You have seven elected board members, who when they come together as one, they happen to be the boss of superintendent. Those elected officials who may or may not have any school experience, who must now evaluate a person who [has] gone to school to learn the intricacies of school operations. But they must now evaluate you on a scale of poor to exceptional. So I think, politically speaking, how do they know what's really good and what's really not. Politics as far as being a savvy superintendent, you must know how to get into the heads and minds and hearts of each one of those individuals. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Ms. Sheen explained how she used the political aspects of her position to develop and share rationales for actions that were most beneficial for students. She stated:

There's politics, in that, those individuals represent the communities in which they live. And the individuals who live in and around the communities where the board members serve, they have agendas. So who do you make happy today? And I think that the most important thing that superintendents can do, is to realize that you're not there to question everybody's move or question everybody's political thoughts. You have to do what's best for kids and explain that in a way so that everyone understands a piece or all of what you are doing.

She continued:

You get people involved in your mission and vision, so that when political wars arise you can stand back and say but when we look at our vision or our mission,

we want this rich environment, not because we want raise taxes. So while bond issues and raising taxes and things like that are political platforms, children are the main focus. You have to be a superintendent who can bring the political conversations back to what's practical and what's best for our children. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

Similarly, Dr. Roth spoke of her coordinating, collaborative and corrective efforts with her school board members. She said:

You have to work with all of your board members constantly. You have to communicate with all your board members. You can't tell your President everything and tell the others nothing. That's politics. You have to train the board, be in constant training with your board members. You have to think that you are a team member with the board. I realize that I am an employee, [who is] correcting a team member with the board [on the school board]. If I don't redirect, they could get themselves into a problem. They're not paid to do their job; I am paid to do a job. It's in my best interest to lead and guide and be a leader who carries us into success, rather than failure. (Superintendent-, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth referred to the fact that she is compensated to fulfill the duties of the superintendency. However, the school board members are not compensated, but are elected to their positions, thus their agendas are determined and driven by political interests.

The Black female superintendents in this study shared their thoughts and actions regarding their navigation the landscape of identity politics and position politics. The

superintendents also shared some strategies that they employed to mitigate the challenges associated with these political aspects. Black women's independent and oppositional identities also incorporate a form of identity politics or a worldview that values Black women's lived experiences for the development of a critical Black consciousness and political strategies.

While the superintendent participants revealed experiences and strategies for mitigating identity politics and the politics of the superintendency, the aspirants expressed knowledge of the politics, but indicated that this is an area of professional growth for them. Aspirant McNeal explained that she does not possess the political savvy for the position, but she understands that she will need to strengthen her political skills. She said:

I'm not very political. I don't think I do that well, I'm not very politically savvy. I really try to make sure that my work and how I operate on a daily basis show that I am effective. I'm one that will do what is necessary to get things accomplished and in the best interest of everyone that is involved, especially within education, with regards to students and student achievement. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 19, 2013)

She continued:

I definitely know that it is very important, and from my career experiences, it is important to recognize that politics. We don't want to believe that or see that, but it is always there. I think for so long it has been looked at as negative, when it's really about influence and working together with key stakeholders to really create the change that's necessary or maintain what is working effectively. And for so



long, we've looked at politics as something negative and it's not necessarily negative. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 30, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood explained her understanding regarding the political aspects of the superintendency. She stated:

I think that the superintendency is more about, building relationships and I think it is a political job. You have to manage boards; you have to be a go-between. You have to be a negotiator. You have to compromise and you have to be really, really smart about people and the decisions that you make. Depending on the school system, the boards are going to be different...depending on how they're elected and how long they're elected and all those kinds of things. You're going to have to approach every board differently.

She continued:

Some boards don't have as much experience in education and some boards are just out to make their constituents happy. And some boards are very belligerent and some boards are just very compromising. They want to... they want to do what is best for kids. I think that's going to be the hardest part for me, as far as the politics, of the board. Because I think the superintendent's job is largely a politician. Depending on how you manage that, that [the politics] can determine whether you're going to be successful or not. Or whether you're going to be able to evoke change. (Aspirant Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood appeared to have some knowledge of the political aspects of the superintendency in terms of relating to and working with the school board members. She referred to the superintendent's role as that of a politician who would be required to

compromise and collaborate with the school board in order to meet the needs of the students.

The political aspects of the public school superintendency could be viewed as inhibitors for Black women who pursue, and serve in, the position. However, the participants in this study appeared to use the political aspects of the superintendency as motivators for their professional practice and pursuit of the position. While not all participants recounted experiences with politics that they related to their identities, they all shared experiences related to their families and their mentors in their educational and professional pursuits.

### **Family**

According to Collins (2009), “all African American women encounter the common theme of having their work and family experiences shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender and class” (p. 74). For Black women leaders, the struggle appears to be more nuanced because of the oppressions that may occur simultaneously in their professional, educational and home/family environments. The simultaneity of oppressions and family structures of the participants appeared to serve as motivators for the participants educational and professional advancements and achievements.

The family structures of the participants in this study varied from traditional to non-traditional structures. The ideal of a traditional family structure does not consistently align with matriarchal family structures or the benefits of this non-traditional family structure, led by matriarchs (Collins, 2009). Matriarch family structures may be viewed as inhibitors for Black women’s educational and professional pursuits.

“Black women who find themselves maintaining families by themselves often feel they have done something wrong” (Collins, 2009, p. 84). This conceptualization is a component of Black women’s struggles. Roth did not attend college immediately after graduating from high school. She got married, had a child, and then divorced.

In her own words, Superintendent Roth described her thoughts about being young, divorced, and a single-mother:

I also look at external factors, such as, I married right out of high school, then divorced 5 years later. As a single Mom, my mind kept racing. I kept thinking ‘I have to be able to take care of myself and my child. I have to.’

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

As a Black, single mother, Superintendent Roth had to become the head of the household, sole financial provider, and working mother. This challenge, or struggle, motivated her to continue her college education and pursue a professional degree.

Some Black family structures are seen as being deviant because they challenge patriarchal assumptions. Dr. Roth’s experience during her second marriage appeared to be a challenge to the patriarchy. She said:

When my husband went out on disability, it was rather shocking. I thought, wait a minute, this is supposed to be different and so I had to come to terms with that. That also kept me motivated, keep doing, because now I have to be a helper to my husband. I have to take on the majority of all the bills and everything else, and so, wow. I just kept going and these factors allowed me to do what’s in my heart to do. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth explained that her role as the primary income source was unexpected. She understood this assumed role to be different from what is expected of women and she believed that she had to adjust to the role. Dr. Roth's unexpected role also appeared to challenge the negative image of the Black matriarch, as she was determined to be a help to her family and her husband, the patriarch.

The participants also shared their experiences of *mothering* and *other mothering* that supported them in their educational attainment and professional practices. For Black women, *mothering* and *other mothering* includes actions that address the needs of children, mothers, and the community. According to Collins (2009), Black mothers encourage their daughters to develop skills to confront race and gender oppressions.

Black mothers also emphasize education as the vehicle for advancement (Collins, 2009). As such, the participants revealed *mothering* and *other mothering* experiences that supported the idea of education as an important factor for advancement. Aspirant McNeal shared her recollection of her mother's encouragement and advocacy for education:

I was raised by a single mom who really put education in the front of our minds (my sister and I). We needed to make sure we got an education, be successful, and be able to support ourselves. And so education has always been at the forefront of my mind and I've always had an aspiration of getting a doctorate. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal reported that her single mother reiterated the value and importance of education. Aspirant Lakewood also revealed her mother's encouragement of educational attainment. She stated:

Ultimately my mom and dad got divorced. My mom was a single parent and she continued to push us toward education. I saw how hard she had to work as a single parent, how much she had to carry and I did not want to work that hard. And so my goal was to go to college. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

She told of her experience with *other mothering* from her father, and she referred to her mothering of her brothers:

I'm the oldest of three children. It just seems like, back then, my parents always depended on the oldest child, to have like a lot of the responsibility. I [would], at school and home teach my brothers. Education was really important in family, my dad. He wanted to see the world and when he came back, he had a different perspective on what he wanted from his self and his kids, his family, once he had one. One of the things he would always say was, 'Education is the way out.'

(Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood explained that her father emphasized the importance of education in the same manner that her mother reiterated the benefits of an education for Black women. In this case, her father's support was aligned with the aspects of *other mothering* because of his reference to educational attainment as emancipating.

Similarly, Superintendent, Dr. Roth, had an experience with *other mothering* from her grandmother. According to Collins (2009), "Black daughters learn to expect to work, to strive for an education so they can support themselves" (p. 198). Dr. Roth revealed that her grandmother's *mothering*, and another type of *other mothering*, supported her pursuit of a doctorate. She said:

My dad's mother took me and raised me, and I believe it was those values that were instilled in me at an early age that helped me be somebody. My grandmother used to say, 'Be somebody, get an education, be somebody, be sweet, be somebody.' Those were her words every day, and here I am today. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth explained her that her aunt obtained her masters' degree and she was enamored with the picture of her aunt at graduation. She said:

I think that influenced me, my grandmother's encouragement as I grew up, her faith, her values, her beliefs that she instilled in me. The fact that I had an aunt with a picture on the wall and she had gotten her masters', and I was astonished because of the robe and the way it was draped, you know you get your masters and your different colors. I would always look at that, in awe, and say, 'I want to have a robe like that.' I asked my grandmother one day, what's after that? [And] She said, 'What do you mean?' and I said, 'What do you get?' [Her grandmother's response] 'You get a bachelors and you get a masters.' I asked, 'Then what else do you do after that?' She said, 'You get a doctorate if you want to.' And that stuck in my mind. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth explained that her motivation to obtain a graduate and doctorate was motivated by her grandmother who appeared have taken on the role of both *mother* and *other mother* for her.

Black women's experiences of *mothering* and *other mothering* appear to be aligned to their experiences of *mothering of the mind*. *Mothering of the mind* speaks to relationships that can develop between Black women teachers and their Black female and

male students (Collins, 2009). The participants provided accounts of their *mothering of the mind* relationships with their Black teachers, as well as their own experiences of *mothering of the mind* relationships with other minority students.

Aspirant Lakewood discussed her perspectives regarding her role as a teacher for students who are affluent, with parents who can afford resources to support their learning and academic success. She also contrasted her perspectives of her role as a teacher of non-affluent students. Aspirant Lakewood seemed to assert that non-affluent students were in greater need of teachers who would be engaged in *mothering of the mind* relationships with their students. She said:

Just for example, tutoring after school or tutoring for Saturday school, affluent kids' parents will pay [for] a tutor to come in [to the home or non-school setting]. So basically, I don't have to teach, I can throw page numbers on the wall [assign independent assignments or lessons]. I've seen it over and over, page number on the board, if they don't know how to do it [lessons/assignments], their parents will explain it to them or they'll get somebody [tutor] to come in and explain it to them.

She stated her contrasting point regarding non-affluent students:

For my kids, I'm it because they can't go home and count on their parents to explain it to them or paying somebody to do it [lessons/assignments]. I am the beginning, the capital letter and the period. I have to make sure that [learning] that happens for them. I've always wanted to make sure to [teach] every year, every day like they'd never get another good teacher. I always go in every day as an administrator, thinking that, "this has to be the break-out year for these kids."

They need to get what they need right now, to help them graduate. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood explained her belief about the importance of an effective teacher, especially for students who have limited instructional and academic resources beyond the classroom environment. She spoke of how she valued her role as an educator and administrator who was inclined to provide optimal instruction and service to her students each day. Aspirant Lakewood appeared to be committed to *mothering of the mind* relationships with her students.

Similarly, aspirant McNeal described her perspectives of the *mothering of the mind* relationships she developed with her students via their involvement in dance and school clubs. She discussed how:

A lot of times, because they want to be involved in the clubs and involved in the dance teams, they had to have good grades, and so that was a way of helping them to stay on track with regards to their academics. I didn't know how to break-dance when I first started, but I knew that it (break-dancing) was something that they were inspired to do and wanted to do. So I thought I could just start a club and this would give them something to do, rather than be on the streets from 3:35 to 5:00 or later at night.

She continued:

So just having this avenue to be doing something positive, instead of negative, and just getting opportunities for them to compete and meet other students from across the district and getting them together to be a part of different competitions and so forth. And so, with that, it was like they were taking ownership of it



because they knew that if they took ownership of it [dancing], it would really turn out to be something very positive for them. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal indicated that the success of her *mothering of the mind* relationships with her students was based on her identifying and supporting the students' interests. Her *mothering of the mind* relationships appeared to be beneficial for her students' academic, social, and emotional growth.

Family responsibilities and commitments have been identified as barriers (Tallerico & Blount, 2009) to superintendency pursuits and ascension. For the participants in this study, family aspects appeared to be motivators for their educational and professional pursuits and careers. According to Collins (2009), mothering, other mothering, and mothering of the mind relationships are paramount in the integration of work and life for Black women. The participants' experiences exemplified how they created work-life integration.

### **Autoethnographic Account: Work-life Balance Versus Work-life Integration**

In the following account, I explain how work-life balance is never synchronized. Instead, it is in a constant state of flux. I identify as a woman (married with children), biracial (African America/Latina), scholar-practitioner, and district leader all of which compete for different amounts of time, of energy, and of soul. *Your job is not for someone with children and a family!* This statement, made by an individual who had earlier challenged my choice to be both mother and career professional, encompasses a dialectic of oppression (Collins, 2009) meant to assign minority women like myself to subordinate spaces where we struggle to fulfill the demands of work, of life roles, and of

personal responsibilities. In order to feel and be successful, I conceptualize work-life balance differently, for it is a fractured ideal in contemporary popular culture that has created very real tensions for minority mothers who are also professionals, scholars, and leaders.

As a biracial woman, mother, wife, school district executive leader, and doctoral student, I have struggled to achieve a balance between my work and life obligations. As such, balancing or paying equal amounts of attention to each of my roles is impossible. For example, I spend all of my weekends with my husband and three children at our home in South Texas while my weekdays are consumed by more than 70 hours of work at my district leadership job in North Texas (I work and live in two cities that are 275 miles apart). My work/life landscape is uniquely navigated by both car and airplane, as my numerous arrivals and departures still result in only two days with my family and five days at my workplace.

I am also challenged to carve out time to devote to the intellectually rigorous thinking and writing of my doctoral dissertation and other research projects. If I am lucky, I can squeeze in a hair appointment and/or other personal hobbies such as reading a magazine. Regrettably, achieving a balance between my work and life experiences is an ideal I have woefully failed to accomplish for the past two years. Therefore, I admit I regret neglecting some priorities over others.

Yet, I recognize the uniqueness of my participation in the diverse expressions of the American work experience. As Collins (2009) contended, Black women, as a group in the United States, “live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female” (Collins, 2009, pg. 27). The concept of intersectionality was coined by Black

legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), to describe the multiple oppressions experienced by Black women. Crenshaw argued that Black women are discriminated against in ways that do not distinctly fit into the legal categories of *racism* or *sexism*, but these oppressions are an intersection of both racism and sexism.

My experiences as a Black woman, mother, wife, school district executive, and emerging scholar have stimulated my understanding of the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and the ideal of a work-life balance. My consciousness of race and gender intersections has assisted with my understanding of my existence, connections between my experiences, and my thinking about these experiences. Gwaltney (1980) noted that the mind of the man and the woman is the same, “but this business of living makes women use their minds in ways that men don’t even have to think about” (Gwaltney, 1980, pg. 33).

I contend that my struggle with the ideal of work-life balance is situated in the intersectionality of my experiences. In other words, just as I cannot isolate one identity over another, I cannot isolate one priority, role, or job over another, which is why I find that work-life is always in a constant flux. It is, then, my job not to feel too guilty when I believe I am neglecting one priority for another. *Your job is not for someone with children and a family!* suggests I created the imbalance between work and life by choosing to work and have a family. On the contrary, I see this statement loaded with inequitable expectations. I see a balancing act as oppressive because I see my intersection of race and gender, and that of work and life, as fluid, never balanced, and always in flux. I am a mother and wife, just as much as I am Black woman, school leader,

or scholar; accepting this paradox and living with the tension that may exist because others around me don't understand it is an ontological stance I accept.

### **Theme 1 Synopsis**

According to Collins (2009), “on some level, people who are oppressed usually know it” (p.11). The participants in this study appeared to demonstrate consciousness of their racial and gendered identities and the oppression related to their identities. The participants revealed oppressions in the forms of biases and stereotypes that they related to either their race or gender and in some cases to both their racial and gendered identities.

Black women have historically been oppressed in the United States and have produced social theory in order to reject and oppose oppression (Collins, 2009). The participants here revealed how they opposed racial and gendered stereotypes in both their educational and professional experiences. In the case of the study participants, the racial and gender oppressions were intended to be inhibitors. Instead, these oppressions served as the participants' catalysts for resistance, thus, in many cases the inhibitors were transformed into motivators.

Collins (1998) asserted that the knowledge gained at the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for developing and disseminating the subjugated knowledge of Black women's critical social theory. The participants' sharing of their experiences of the oppressions that were placed on them at the intersection of race and gender have allowed for the crafting of knowledge related to their racial and gendered identities, permitting me to share our co-constructed knowledge through this dissertation.

## **Theme 2: Non-traditional/Non-linear Educational and Career Pathways**

Scholars (Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002; Kowalski, 1999) have contended that the social, economic, and educational reforms inherent in schools have re-shaped the superintendent's multifunctional role as an instructional leader, collaborator, and culture re-constructionist. According to Brunner and Kim (2010), "given the current focus on academic achievement, alternative routes to the superintendency may be superior to the historical norm" (p. 285). The participants did not initially elect to attend college to become educators. Nonetheless, their educational and professional experiences were aligned with the educational field.

Aspirant Lakewood pursued a major outside of the field of education. She explained that her choice of journalism as a major was a compromise that she was willing to make because she enjoyed writing. She also indicated that her divorce encouraged her to consider how she would manage the mobility of a journalism job with being a single mother. She said:

I majored in journalism. I wanted to major in teaching, or education, but my dad told me I wouldn't make any money. Since I loved writing, I thought that journalism was a nice compromise. Upon graduating, after having two kids [while] in college. I wanted to stay home with them [children]. I didn't want my kids to have to go off on long journeys and assignments or have to leave my children. But, eventually, the marriage didn't work and I decided to pursue teaching. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood valued Black motherhood but she had to redefine her idea of motherhood in order to pursue a career that she believed was more conducive for a single

mother. Additionally, Lakewood indicated that she graduated from college and became a stay-at-home mother. Her status as a single mother influenced the path she took in the field of education.

Superintendent Roth explained that she worked in a daycare environment for several years before she began her pursuit of a teacher certification. She reported her experience with another Black woman leader in the day care supported the alignment of her passion with her teaching skills. She recalled how:

I spent 15 years in daycare, prior to getting my certification and becoming a teacher. I worked with the babies, with every age level in a day care, as well as spending time working in a private daycare, owned by an African American leader [my] pastor's wife. She's actually the one who taught me how to teach, how to embrace the passion that I had. I started going back to school on a \$200 scholarship that I received because of leaders at one of the daycare centers and what they saw in me. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Similar to Dr. Roth, aspirant McNeal reported how her experience volunteering with schools led her to teaching. As a college dance major, she worked with students in after-school dance programs. She believed her interactions with students via the dance programs were a positive influence on them. McNeal indicated these experiences forged her pursuit of teaching as a career. Additionally, McNeal's experience was also aligned to the premise of other mothering (Collins, 2009). She said:

With regards to becoming an educator, in college my major was in dance and I have a minor in psychology. In college, I did some volunteering with different organizations and schools, and doing some after-school programs with students

with dance. I used that as an avenue to help students build confidence.

Sometimes, with some of the students that I worked with, it just helped them have a place to go, where they were safe.

She continued:

For instance, I worked for these kids at a non-profit organization and I did dance classes for their after-school program. I think after those experiences, I realized that I enjoyed being around kids and being a positive influence, being that person that they could talk to and I would listen. There was opportunity for me in an ISD [school district] to be a dance teacher and so I took that [teaching position] on.

(Aspirant, McNeal, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal described how her work experience with a non-profit organization, as dance teacher in an after school program, afforded her opportunities to be a positive influence for students. Although she did not begin her professional career in the field of education, Ms. McNeal's interaction with children, as an other mother," inspired her pursuit of a career in public school education. The participants' experiences that aligned with other mothering influenced their pursuits of professional careers in education.

Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, shared her work experiences in an early college program, after she graduated from college with a degree in speech and hearing therapy. Ms. Sheen explained that her experience as a Guided Studies Teacher in an innovative junior college program supported her interest in school (PK-12) counseling. Ms. Sheen's early work experiences are indicative of community other mothering for social supports to students. She told how:

I came straight out of college and got a job in a junior college as a Guided Studies teacher at E C. College. It's a program for students who graduated from high school, but they're not quite ready for college, a guided studies program. We had guided studies ELA [English Language Arts], guided studies math, the one that I was doing, it wasn't ELA or Math, it was almost like guidance or guidance studies, decision making or career planning. And I don't doubt that in some way or another that played into my decision later on, to seek a counseling certification. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

Ms. Sheen also shared her extended work experience with a community development organization. She explained she was affiliated with the educational component of the community projects. According to Ms. Sheen, her work in community development allowed her to travel to various local and international communities for the purpose of community uplift or support and nurture of those in the community. She said:

I joined a group that was focused on inter-city community development. And in that position, I had a chance to work with very impoverished neighborhoods, in huge cities like Chicago, and New York, D.C. I always worked in the education component of the community development projects. But it gave me a chance to broaden my experiences, from rural East Texas, which is where I was born and raised. I did that for about 12 years. At the time I had a chance to travel to Africa and some parts of Europe and Egypt, working in villages and communities, helping them establish day care centers and neighborhood operated or village run, school-to-work programs. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)



Ms. Sheen's work experiences prior to her career in the PK-12 school system were part of a non-traditional pathway into the field of education. These experiences typify community other mothering, which reflects a generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among Black women. "The connectedness with others and common interest expressed by community other mothers model a very different value system, one whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward" (Collins, 2009, p. 207).

Dr. Roth reported how her transition from elementary teacher to principal was actualized after she served as a teacher for only a few years. She remarked:

I went from being a teacher to being a principal, and it was amazing. I was the principal at the same campus where I taught. Two weeks before school started, I got the job. So literally overnight, I had to become the boss and not the friend.

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

This rapid, unexpected transition appeared to challenge Dr. Roth to revise her level of personal accountability and ethic of caring to encompass a larger community (faculty and staff) for which she was now responsible.

Participants recounted their educational and professional experiences with the ideological dimension of oppression, and associated controlling images and stereotypes, while obtaining their education. Still, some participants also revealed their experiences with class based oppression while pursuing a college education. Two participants described how the financial requirements of obtaining a college education were a central determining factor in their decision to attend college.

Superintendent Dr. Roth reported that she was a promising student and was one of the top ten students in her high school class. Partially due to limited financial resources, Dr. Roth married after she graduated from high school, instead of attending college. She told of how:

My first year of marriage, which was my first year right out of high school.

People who knew me, kept saying, “Why aren’t you going to college?” And I wanted to say “because no one had the money for me to go to college.” But, I didn’t want my parents or my grandparents to look to be seen in a negative way. So I said, “I just don’t want to go right now.” The truth is, they didn’t put back the money. I didn’t have the money; I was fresh out of high school.

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth detailed how she received a college scholarship, but decided to forgo college attendance and married instead. She explained that although her college education was delayed, she funded her education independently. She recalled how:

I had a \$500 scholarship to B. University and I knew that a \$500 scholarship, it wasn’t going to get me through B (university). And so I got married, the first year out of high school. I didn’t go to college right after high school. And it wasn’t given to me on silver platter. I had a few scholarships through T. Jr. College and a few through UT T. And the rest has been out of my pocket, through loans that I paid back, a couple of grants, but not many. So the majority of my education was paid for out of my pocket. I think that that also dictates (pause) the amount of energy that you put into what you’re doing. I wasn’t going to fail, because to me, that was wasted money. So, you put your left foot forward and you keep going.

Those are the things that influenced me, in addition to the way that I was raised.

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth's experience seemed to demonstrate how an academically prepared Black woman can be sidetracked. Her experience of economic challenges affected her trajectory toward college. She explained how the lack of financial resources affected her educational advancement after high school.

Similarly, Aspirant Lakewood described her experience as a high school graduate whose academic excellence permitted her to graduate from high school one year earlier than was the norm. Lakewood's early advancement to college should have generated scholarships and other financial resources. She was not afforded the option of an Ivy League education or a school of her choice. Instead, it appears that her choice was based on her parent's ability to fund a college education. She said:

I was able to graduate (from high school) a year early, but because of that, we (my parents and I) weren't prepared for me to go to college. I had to take the ACT and the SAT, and figure out what school I was going to be able to go to and what school my parents were going to be able to afford. My dad had mentioned Notre Dame because of its Catholic background or Catholic history. I knew that [Notre Dame] wasn't going to be an option for me because it was going to be way too expensive. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood's experience as an early high school graduate influenced her non-traditional educational career. She indicated that she and her parents were not prepared for her to begin her post-high school graduation education. As an early high

school graduate and non-traditional college student, Aspirant Lakewood demonstrated her academic readiness to begin her college education sooner than expected.

Dr. Roth referred to her experience of being a non-traditional student when she completed on-line course work to obtain her superintendent's certification. She compared her participation in an online environment to the instruction offered in what she termed, "traditional settings." Dr. Roth stated:

When I was going through the superintendent's course at P. B., because it was an online program I did more than what was assigned. Because again I wanted to be able to compete with people who had sat in classes in the traditional setting.

Being older, I thought, 'Wow, here I am in an online program, although it was nothing for my daughters, they were doing it.' I wanted to compete with traditionally-trained students sitting in classrooms. I needed to learn more.

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013).

Dr. Roth's experience as a non-traditional student in a non-traditional, online college class caused her to strive harder in an educational environment that was not as familiar to her as her previous school environments. She appeared to be cognizant of the need to adjust in order to thrive as a non-traditional student in a non-traditional context.

### **Autoethnographic Account: "Me Search" as Research**

Academic environments have always served as arenas for dialectic and experiential maneuvers for me. I began middle school, high school, and college simultaneously, as a student in biomedical program that would have made Dewey proud. My acceptance and participation in this experientially advanced environment evidenced my advanced abilities, but also documented my difference from the other students who

had no affinity for balancing equations, biological phenomena, and inquiry of mental capacities.

My experiences in high school allowed me opportunities to develop leadership skills and relationships with others. I was elected president of my graduating class each year. This feat was largely due to my ability to ensure that my competence and communications overshadowed stereotypes related to my femaleness and race. I was fascinated by the variety of cultures in my high school and I consistently made every effort to immerse myself in all related activities available.

There was an attempt by one of my teachers to marginalize me, as she had submitted a written recommendation to my class sponsor to explain that I was “involved in too many extracurricular activities.” My class sponsor responded by reporting, “Telling her no only fuels her, she will not let go.” My class sponsor was very supportive of my aspirations and defensive with those who doubted my abilities. She was a special education teacher who allowed me to interact with many of her students who were severely emotionally disturbed, autistic, and intellectually disabled. I was impressed with her ability and skill to consistently remain calm during volatile situations in order to assert her genuine care for her students. We shared an affinity for “liberating the oppressed, by liberating the oppressor” (Waite et al, 2007, p. 201) and she was instrumental in the development of my passion for those who learned differently, thus requiring teachers who could instruct differently.

Attempts to marginalize me continued at my private, Marianist University. My college advisor, who later became a dean, recalled that I always asked questions that challenged the normal ways of thinking. She indicated that these inquisitions were

viewed by some in the university department as debating the theories that were the basis of all psychological research. I questioned because I was attempting to understand their truths, as Noddings (2007) indicated, some inquiries require philosophical methods of investigation. My questioning also challenged and opposed some professors' philosophical stances, an intended consequence for my understanding, but an unintended consequence for my professors.

I further demonstrated my questioning of ideologies and philosophical truths when I developed the first ever, Miss (Mr.) University Pageant. This unique pageant, which provided male students with the opportunity to compete in a contest and showcase their talents, manipulated hegemonic aesthetics and abilities to model attire traditionally reserved for females. The male students' courage, willingness, and ability to perform on stage supported the de-centering of the hierarchy, making the aesthetic meaning the opposite of the original meaning (Powell, 1998). My conceptualization of a pageant that featured male students being showcased in traditionally female aspects appeared to be my attempt to flip the binaries and problematize normalization and gender stereotypes in this catholic university.

My undergraduate studies also afforded me the opportunity to develop my concept of "clear" or color-blindness. I wrote about my inquiries regarding the dominance of race (color), ethnicity, and culture in an environment in which intelligence and service to others were prevalent. My theory was that viewing others as "clear/race-less" would remove the barriers of difference, thus increasing levels of consciousness of, and service to, others. As Noddings (2007) contended, our growth and development of ethics are linked to the ethics and growth of those whom we encounter.

Like my study participants, my experiences as an undergraduate student were my formative years that, undergirded my entry into the professional world. I entered the field of education on the firm foundation of my psychology degree which aligns with my participants' non-traditional paths to education. I chose to participate in an alternative certification program in which I obtained my teaching certification, while I also gained experience as a teacher in a classroom setting. As a first year special education teacher I continued to flip the binaries by insisting on inclusive education for students with special needs. My students, who had been labeled as *disabled*, demonstrated to me just how *abled* they were to learn with varied methodologies, accommodations, and modifications. My students were also receptive to the ethic of caring (Noddings, 2007) and other mothering (Collins, 2009), which were the bases of my instruction and pedagogy. The inclusive innovations that I pioneered resulted in students becoming integrated, and included in general education settings. The supported inclusion of my students into general education classrooms proved beneficial for them instructionally and emotionally. They were now included in the environments that they were previously restricted from.

My postmodernist work in the field of special education had always humbled me and afforded me professional relationships with others who believed that our students with *different abilities* must be provided outstanding learning experiences to the greatest extent possible. I have immersed myself in my work as an advocate for those who have been oppressed and marginalized.

One of my mentors, a former special education director, advised me to *work to live, not live to work*. She wanted to impress upon me the importance of balancing my priorities for work and family. I still negotiate this balance as I advocate for my own son,

who received special education services as a student, with other health impairments, due to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

I am considered a leader and visionary in the educational field. I credit my polished, yet unfinished, skills to a professor and mentor who taught me to pursue challenges in order to become better prepared to manage issues, supervise diverse staff, and maintain a passion for educating all students. I memorialized his philosophical tenets during a guest presentation for one of his graduate classes. His words of wisdom forged my continual pursuit of knowledge, as he directed me to a doctoral program and introduced me to another extraordinary professor who immediately inspired me to apply to the program and embark on a journey toward social justice.

The contextual representations in this auto-ethnographic account detail selected educational and professional experiences that propelled me to this place, a place in which theory and knowledge inform my practice. This place is inclusive of my experiences as a student, educator, school district leader, aspiring superintendent, and an emerging scholar-practitioner who is completing a doctoral study focused on race, gender, oppression, marginalization, advocacy, and activism. In this place, my study has provided a space in which consciousness of *difference* is relevant and meaningful to understanding my identity and the identities of others.

## **Theme 2 Synopsis**

The participants in this study did not elect teaching as their initial careers. They all initially pursued careers that were aligned with the educational field. They all had experiences in other professional fields prior to pursuing their careers in education and educational leadership. It appeared that the participants' non-traditional/non-linear



educational and career pathways served as catalysts for their educational and professional pursuits.

### **Theme 3: Experience of Difference: Diversity, Struggle, and Activism**

We live and work in a diverse world. The United States is often described as a global society. Public schools are often representative of the vast differences that exist along racial, class, or socio economic lines. The participants revealed their experiences in educational contexts that were indicative of these differences. They explained their experience of difference in terms of their responsiveness to diversity, acceptance of the struggles related to difference, and their commitment to activism for their students of different races and from different backgrounds and cultures.

#### **Diversity**

Superintendent Roth revealed an experience that occurred when she was an elementary classroom teacher. She witnessed a Black female teacher's explanation of race to a bi-racial female student. Dr. Roth indicated that her observation of this student's experience, was a turning point in her career, one which helped her to decide to pursue an advanced degree. Her eyes were opened by the manner in which a teacher responded to a student in a public school environment comprised of increasingly diverse student populations. Roth identified the need for educators to understand, and be responsive to, racial diversity. She said:

About three or four years into teaching, I saw an incident with a teacher and student, and that one single incident was the turning point for me to go back to school to get my masters'. Because the incident made me believe that I could be a better principal and I could tell teachers 'there's a place and a time for

everything.’ This one teacher, whom I respected and still do, told a student, a bi-racial student that she was Black. This devastated the student, she cried, she was devastated, she debated with the teacher, this was a fourth grader, and she said, but ‘My Mommy told me I was White.’ I have bi-racial nieces and nephews, and so it hit home. I thought that if this is what we’re doing in classes, this is wrong. I thought we were supposed to be teaching. I thought everybody was supposed to teach and leave race out of it. However, this was a teacher from the “‘ld school’ and she said the law said, ‘Whatever your Daddy is, that’s what you are.’ I said, ‘No, that’s not what the law says, times have changed.’ (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth explained that this experience (of diversity) began her leadership trajectory, as she pursued an administrative certification so that she would be in a position to influence other educators. She also explained that she was persuaded to become an administrator because of observing administrators not being respectful in their delivery of corrective guidance. She stated:

Administrators who did things [disrespect students and employees] you don’t treat people like that. I thought that there’s a certain way to treat people to get them to do what you want them to do. You do have to step in and you have to ‘call the shots.’ You have to correct people, but there’s a way to do it. And so, that’s what influenced me to get to where I am today. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Superintendent Roth referred to her observations of administrators who were not as receptive to diversity within diverse educational context. Aspirant McNeal spoke of

her experience as a student and racial and gendered *other*, in a school environment that was not diverse. She said:

I was the only African American student at all, up until my senior year in high school. I was the only African American in my classes, because we just had that small percentage of African Americans where I lived at that time. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood suggested that she encouraged students to be diverse. She reported that diversity should be embraced in coursework in public schools and graduate programs. She explained:

I want to empower kids to step out and be different. Question the American Dream, be critical thinkers. Making informed decisions about equality. Get decision-making jobs. Come through all of our courses - these should embrace diversity. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

She thought that decisions about equality should be informed by diversity of thought and critical thinking. Aspirant Lakewood appeared to be a proponent of diversity in educational contexts and an advocate for diverse demographics.

Collins (2009) asserted that *mothering of the mind* relationships, previously discussed, are not like traditional forms of mentoring, with its provision of technical skills and network of academic and professional contacts. The participants reported mentoring experiences that appeared to be inclusive of the traditional forms of mentoring and mothering of the mind relationships with their own mentors, and in their service as mentors.

Superintendent Roth reflected about her educational experience with a White male college professor whom she considered a mentor. She indicated that the professor challenged her thinking, but she believed that this was characteristic of the care that her mentor expressed to support her in their mentor relationship. Dr. Roth underscored the importance of mentorship and the need for mentors to complete follow-up actions with the protégé. She stated:

I was challenged to think about who I wanted to be by college professors who cared. It's one thing to say to a student, you can be all you want to be, and it's another to follow-up. That's why mentorship is so important to me. You have to follow-up with people, even when they don't follow-up with you. You have to call, even if it's once a year, so those things influence me.

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December, 30, 2013)

Superintendent Roth also reflected about her mentor from a professional organization. She explained that her mentor was the only African American woman who was visible within the organization. Dr. Roth spoke about the inspiration provided by her Black female mentor. She stated:

V.M., she challenged me to move up. She was the only African American woman in the Texas Council of Women School Executives [who] was actively seen when I joined. She inspired me to become a member, to do a presentation, to get my name out there. I looked up to her because she had a distinguished look.

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Superintendent Roth appeared to benefit from her professional mentor relationships with a Black female professional and educational leader. She also shared

her experience of mentorship by college professors in her doctoral program. She described how she was one of a few students to complete the program. More importantly, she emphasized how she was the first and only Black female to receive a doctorate from her university's doctoral program. She said:

One year after becoming a principal, my mentor professor Dr. R. S. [a White male], called me from UT T. and said, 'S., S. F. A. is opening up a program, a doctorate program in education. First get your application filled out, I know you'll get in.' I said, 'Oh my gosh, it's pretty difficult to get into a doctorate program.' He said, 'It's the first in East Texas, they're looking for people like you, you know, put my name down as a reference.' I said, 'Oh my god, what if I fail?' He said, 'You won't fail, they're going to push and push, and tutor and tutor, and work and work and help and help, until every person in that program graduates.' I said 'Oh Lord!' He said, 'They want it to be successful.'

She continued:

I filled out the application, got accepted and three and a half years later, I was walking across the stage. The first African American woman to get a doctorate at S. F. A. because of the program. And actually, the first African American to get a doctorate in the education program at S. F. A. There were fifteen of us who started out, three dropped out, twelve continued through the program. Of the six of us, I was the only Black in that group, walking across that stage and it felt mighty powerful. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Superintendent Roth spoke of how her mentor encouraged her to apply to the doctoral program, which resulted in her becoming the first, and only, Black woman

graduate of the doctoral program. She credited her mentors in supporting her professional and educational experiences.

Similarly, Aspirant Lakewood described her professional experience with African American female mentors as a new teacher. She told of how:

My best mentors, they were African American women, when I first started teaching. They pulled me aside and they showed me the ropes. They showed me how to do things and what to do...what systems to follow, what policies to follow etc. They taught me everything. Beyond that, I never had others who were very close. They really cared about me and wanted me to be successful. I've never felt that from any other mentor, since it always felt that it was a job thing to do, you call, you ask a question, okay. So for the most part, I felt like I was alone, to try to figure things out. But based on what those earlier mentors had taught me, I was able to figure it out. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 19, 2013)

She continued:

(Mentoring), that has been, besides the classroom, the greatest joy for me is passing along my experiences and information to help, people, to help principals be good to great principals. They have enjoyed my coaching; they have just really receptive. Over the last few years since I haven't been in the classroom, that's been where my joy lies, is being with them. They smile, they relax, [and] they are transparent. They are not worried about me coming [in] 'back-dooring them' or 'throwing them under the bus.' They know that what they see is what they get. They are growing, and that has been fun. Mentoring is allowing others to do and be their best and you learn how to do and be your best. You should be

humble, laughing and vulnerable; open the doors. I don't have the best ideas, but I can be a springboard. To be a good mentor, plant seeds that will snowball. Let them take the credit. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 30, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood recalled her experience serving as a mentor. She highlighted the positive impact that a mentor has on the professional growth of another professional. She shared her perspective of the reciprocal benefits of mentoring relationships.

### **Struggle**

Collins asserted, "To be able to use one's voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a reoccurring struggle" (Collins, 2009, p. 109) for Black women to establish positive self-definitions. A core theme of Black feminist thought is finding a voice to express a collective, self-defined Black Women's standpoint. Collins (2009) contended, "To learn to speak in a unique and authentic voice, Black women must jump outside the frames of the systems" (p. 110) provided by authorities and create their own frames. The constructed knowledge of self is the result of the struggle to replace controlling images with positive self-definitions and knowledge. Aspirant Lakewood detailed her perspective regarding the sense of struggle for Black women.

She stated:

And for me, the greatest joy in anything, is working for something. And if you don't work for it and you're just given it. I would never trade my life for a White woman's life because, for me [that] life would be empty, [because] the struggle isn't there. I embrace the struggle. I love the struggle, although, it gets [difficult]. The struggle has made me who I am and I love who I am. The problem is the

struggle has made me who I am, they don't love who I am. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 30, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood explained that she was appreciative of the struggle. The struggle has helped her shape her identity. However, she did express her thoughts about how others may not be as accepting of the affects that the struggle has had on her identity.

Similarly, Superintendent Roth reported her struggle for self-identity as a Black female in a male dominated family structure and graduate program. She explained that she was encouraged to be prepared to be independent, thus not dependent upon others, specifically White individuals. She indicated:

I grew up hearing, not from my grandparents, but from some individuals in the family, things such as, 'White folks ain't gonna give you anything.' 'You got to get out there and earn your way through life.' 'It's hard on Black folks out there, so you've gotta be careful.'

She continued:

Hearing those things and getting to class, I use to think, men had it made, because they were men and they were the head of the household and they told you what to do. And you were to respect the men of the household. So as far as education is concerned, in classes sometimes I thought that guys where the smartest ones because they had the business sense, especially when I got to graduate school. I didn't have those thoughts when I was just going to school to be a teacher, I had those thoughts when I was going to school to be an administrator.

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 19, 2013)



Superintendent Roth reported that her struggle for self-identity was more evident in graduate school. She did not report having similar self-identity struggles as an undergraduate student studying to become a teacher.

Aspirant McNeal also revealed her experiences with self-identity in educational contexts. She explained that her work ethic was based on her understanding that she had to compete with males and Anglos. She said:

I will say that I've had to work hard to be the best, to make sure that I'm recognized for the talents and the knowledge that I possess. I've had to work harder than others, than other counter-parts such as males, such as Anglo females. I can specifically give examples of the schools, most of the times throughout my educational journey we lived in the suburbs, predominately Anglo. I was often the only African American student in the class. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 30, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal explained how she believed her high-level work ethic would bring attention to her talents and knowledge. She seemed to use experiences of over-working and competing with her White peers as a motivator for her work ethic and performance in educational environments.

Dr. Roth also commented about her experience of struggle while pursuing a college education. She spoke of her own limited knowledge of the preparations necessary for college entry. She also referred to her experience as a non-traditional college student, with minimal college literacy, as "a dark spot" in her educational career. She said:

Counselors back then did not pull you into a room, sit you down and face to face say, ‘What direction are you going in?’ ‘Fill out all of these papers. Here’s how you get there.’ When I was pushed to fill out the application, to T.J.C, I had no idea how to go and enroll in college, literally, none, no idea. I didn’t know I had to go in, go to the registration desk, go to financial aid office, I didn’t know any of that. That was a dark spot. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

Dr. Roth appeared to attribute her struggle with college entrance to her identity as a non-traditional student. While her minimal literacy of all the requirements of college entrance and registration could have been an inhibitor, the experience motivated her in her pursuit of a college education.

### **Autoethnographic Account: Intersectional Identities: From Glass Ceilings to Retractable Roofs**

My identities as a Black female leader have informed my educational and professional experiences in numerous ways. The selection of my doctoral study topic was driven by my interest in the superintendency, the highest position in public school leadership, and my drive to complete a doctorate, the highest degree in educational leadership. My interests, drive, and commitment have converged with my experiences as both a practitioner and scholar. My racial and gendered identities, the intersection of the constructs of race and gender, are lenses from which I conceptualized my educational and professional experiences as I pursue a doctoral degree and the public school superintendency. The intellectual struggle associated with the pursuit of challenges reinforces my belief that the struggle is real, but the greatest learning is in the struggle.

Reading, analyzing, and synthesizing the research about the earliest years of the superintendency, led me to believe that as a Black woman, even with credentials, knowledge, and extensive experience, I would most likely not have been considered for the position. Like many other women, and Black women, my gendered and racial identities would have subsumed me and relegated me to the lower levels of the school system. The available, more likely, the accessible work and possible education for Black women in the early 1900s, most certainly would have excluded me from consideration for the superintendency.

Although I have not yet ascended to the superintendency, my journey on the pathway has not been free of struggle and strife. The intersectionality of my Blackness and femaleness, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have caused me to be met with rejection, oppression, racism, sexism, and overt discrimination. The glass ceilings of racist and sexist ideologies in educational leadership are still present. However, I, like the other women in my study have chosen to be an architect of a new form of leadership. These new constructions have retractable roofs, much like the trendy retractable-roofed stadiums now popular in the athletic *Kingdoms*. The glass ceilings of these new leadership *Queendomes* have been replaced with retractable roofs reinforced with self-determination, advocacy, and empowerment. Similar to the retractable stadium roofs, retraction and closure occurs when the *inclement* aspects of racism and sexism attempt to invade these re-invented leadership environments. With newly constructed education leadership arenas, the educational and professional experiences of Black women leaders and others who have been oppressed, are better situated for leadership preparation and ascension to the public school superintendency.

## **Activism**

Black women's struggle for group survival points to Black women's experiences with social injustice. Collins contends that, "the coalition of politics associated with struggles for institutional transformation link Black women's issues to broader social agendas" (p. 219). These social agendas will include Black women's issues as well as the issues of other groups oppressed by the hegemonic domain of power.

The process of struggle for self-defined knowledge is often the impetus for social justice actions. The participant's revealed professional experiences in which they adopted a social justice stance based on race and gender identities. Their social justice stance indicated they were cognizant of their students' needs. They used their activism to ensure the students' needs were met at the highest levels.

For Black women, their "visionary pragmatism" (Collins, 2009, pg. 190), in which they are aware of the possibilities, yet pragmatic about what is needed to reach these possibilities, supported their social justice stances and deeds indicative of their activism. This visionary pragmatism is related to the nature of work and activism that Black women have undertaken to ensure the survival of Black children and children of other oppressed races.

Aspirant McNeal revealed experiences that appeared to be aligned with visionary pragmatism and activism with a group of minority boys in an after-school community dance program. She explained:

I started [teaching career] in middle school. There was a youth out-reach group and they were really troubled and I developed a club for students, it was a break-dancing club. And the majority of the students were boys. They were boys on

probation, had monitors, so I felt it was a way to keep them off the streets and keep them out of trouble, for, at least until 5:00. I just really used dance as a way to reach kids. And also I was able to see the talent in some students, like I could really see talent in some students and they might not have had any technical training, but they were just talented individuals. I want to just try to open opportunities for them with regards to different performing arts schools that they could be a part of and so forth. And so, just being able to use dance as an avenue to show students that they could do something different and they could use their talents in a way that was positive. So I think that is how I got into education, just seeing how I could use dance to be a positive influence on students. (Aspirant, McNeal, December 19, 2013)

Aspirant McNeal expressed concern about the at risk students who had been remanded to disciplinary placement environments. She said:

Currently we have students that are removed from the general education setting and they go [to other settings] because of disciplinary infractions. And these kids that are considered at-risk, that 5%? As much as we want them to succeed, they most likely will not. But we send them to these more restrictive environments to be rehabilitated, but we don't really consider what to do when they come back to the general education setting to support them behaviorally as well as academically. I believe there's a school of thought that when the students are removed to those more restrictive environments, there's not accountability for these students. So you have no accountability for this place that they are going to, the school that they've left, there's no accountability. This is just a mindset and a

heart-set that these students aren't going to be productive. So, I believe that there's different programs that can be in place to really support these students. There's different structures that can be in place with regards to DAEPs. I also believe that there could be some type of accountability for DAEPs. When it comes to, you have a mission or a vision when it comes to, you're supposed to be rehabilitating students, but, are we doing that effectively? (Aspirant, McNeal, December 30, 2013)

Aspirant Lakewood expressed her activism for students who she believed were not being challenged by their teachers. She indicated:

I was questioning the logic behind, why are you not putting intervention plans in place for our boys who are failing. Why do we have all these wonderful AP strategies for kids, when those same strategies could work for our low-level readers? Why do I have an 11<sup>th</sup> grade teacher teaching kids how to capitalize the personal 'I' and how to write paragraphs and indent, in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, when they're supposed to go to college the next year? So, I think the questions I want to dive at, have kind of put me in a certain place. (Aspirant, Lakewood, December 30, 2013)

Former superintendent, Ms. Sheen, reported that she pursued administration because she wanted to have a greater impact on the decisions related to students' education. She stated:

It (pursuit of administrator role) had more to do with the teachers, and what they would be doing in terms of the students. I had direct contact with students and in public schools, of course, speech therapy in public schools was considered a

teaching role and guidance counseling, it's direct counseling and not therapeutic counseling, so I already had these experiences, but I wanted to see where the decisions got made. Not so much as where they got made, because I knew intellectually where they got made, but 'how' they got made in terms of what teachers would do, what curriculum would be implemented, what programs would be adopted, you know, what groups of students would be able to do and what advantages would be given to them.

She continued:

Those decisions were administrative decisions and especially being a Black woman, I felt very strongly that some serious administrative decisions needed to be made in terms of Black students, and the only way that I was going to be able to affect that, in some sort of systematic way, was to be an administrator. In fact, I went right out of counseling to the Director of Special Programs, then principal, then curriculum director and then to superintendent. (Former Superintendent, Ms. Sheen, December 30, 2013)

Ms. Sheen revealed that she pursued an administrator career to exercise her activism for students, specifically Black students. She wanted to be a key decision-maker regarding the administrative components of public school education. She obtained the position of public school superintendent to lead the decision-making processes and continue her activism.

Superintendent Roth shared her perspectives regarding Black women's empowerment and activism for diversity. She stated:

Social Justice is exercising the freedoms that allow us to access education that impacts every student to the highest degree. Which basically to me, means that every student, no matter what his/her race is, no matter what country they came from, to us to educate, they have the opportunity to be involved in any activity, extra-curricular activity and any classroom activity, and have access to it.

(Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December, 30, 2013)

She further explained:

Because, I want to make sure that all of our teachers understand how to reach and teach every child, regardless of whether they're rich or poor. It just doesn't matter, it doesn't matter what side of the tracks you live on, it doesn't matter what side of the mountain you live on, what bridge you live under. You have the same access to the education that we provide and to the activities and everything that's there. I think that it's my job to make sure that we educate students not only within our walls of the district, but to provide opportunities outside of the district. So that they know, as Marva Collins taught, there's a whole new world out there. There's more to life than just what's just right there. You have a whole world out there, it's my job to make sure my teachers know how to teach that. So that the poorest of the poor, who's sitting over here, whose grandparents have no vehicle, no education past the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, no means of financial backing for you to go to college. But that child is reached because of a teacher who can see beyond where that child is today. And that to me is instilling social justice. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December, 30, 2013)



Dr. Roth continued:

Diversity in schools, to me, is the same thing. It's the understanding that we are all different. A lot of people say, 'I see no color.' Yes you do, there is color.

Color is the different shades of our skin, so you see that. And maybe if you say, I don't see color, maybe that's why we teach a color-blind prescriptive in education.

She asserted:

Seeing that this child over here is gifted and talented and needs more, not more assignments or longer assignments, but needs a different challenge. That's teaching diversity. See and understand that the student over here with learning disabilities needs you to accommodate their lessons. Understand that I am from a different world and there are different things that I want to learn about. And don't be afraid of my diverse background, don't be afraid of that, embrace it and just let it happen. If we can all do that, then we can live in schools where diversity is the norm. We accept it, we embrace it and everything that we offer ends up being social justice for all students, in my opinion. (Superintendent, Dr. Roth, December 30, 2013)

### **Autoethnographic Account: Why Activism? What About Social Justice?**

Leadership is difficult to define. Social justice has been defined by some scholars (Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Theoharris, 2009) with an emphasis on marginalized groups, to equitably include them in the moral fabric of society by not only educating *others*, but also by educating the privileged majority *about others*. However, as Horsford (2011) stated, education has had more difficulty determining and defining what social justice

looks like. I considered my literature review and definition of terms with this in mind (see Appendix C). I included Collin's (2009) definition of a social justice project as I consulted the literature of my dissertation committee members who had researched and written about the topic of social justice leadership. My review of their works led me to believe that their discourse was clear and concise regarding what social justice looked like in the context of educational leadership and practice. I also believed that I had been a witness to, and a recipient of, their social justice actions. Referring to the literature of my committee members, and my own educational experiences with their enactments, I was still unsure that my data were meticulously aligned with their social justice frameworks and practices. I even sought out other examples of social justice conceptualizations as I requested, and received, a social justice framework from a scholar whom I met at an AERA conference. This framework provided additional guidance and, like my committee's scholarship, assisted me in considering how to critically analyze my participants' data.

With a critical and analytical lens, I would like to believe that my participants and I have demonstrated actions that are aligned to social justice. I would also like to think that based on the educational and professional experiences that were shared, we had enacted a social justice stance in our practices. In the absence of a social justice protocol, a framework, a rubric, or some other metric to measure or substantiate my own actions and behaviors, as well as those of my participants, I was apprehensive to qualify our experiences as directly aligned to the social justice models and methods that I had researched. Thus, I prefer to relate the participants' experiences to activism, which appeared more aligned with my study's data.

### **Theme 3 Synopsis**

The participants' experience of difference in the forms of diversity, struggle, and activism appeared to be substantive in their development of a critical consciousness about themselves and others. They revealed how difference was evident in various areas of their educational and professional contexts. The participants' experiences demonstrated that with the prevalence of difference, an understanding of, and responsiveness to, diversity and the related struggles of diverse others are needed to ensure activism and to educate diverse demographics.

### **Chapter IV Summary**

I suggest that the public school superintendency is a social location in which the process of fending off hegemonic ideologies and designing counter-hegemonic knowledge should occur. My examination of the educational and professional experiences of myself and other Black women who aspire to the superintendency, Black women who serve and those who have served in the position, is a contribution to the development of counter-hegemonic narratives.

Further, the public school superintendency is a social location in which the presence, participation, and voices of Black women have been silenced and minimized. As Collins contended; "the power of reclaiming these spaces for thinking and doing not what is expected of us, constitutes an important dimension of Black women's empowerment" (p. 304). In the case of this study, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and Black feminist thought, Black women's voices have been centralized, thus beginning the process of reclaiming the space. Black women, revealing their educational and professional experiences related to their racial and

gendered identities, as they aspire to and attained the public school superintendency, constitute a form of Black women's empowerment through the application of Black feminist thought.

## **V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, INTERPRETATIONS, DISCUSSION OF IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the ways in which the racial and gendered identities of Black women inform their educational and professional experiences on the career path of the public school superintendency. I envisioned that a better understanding of how this intersection between Black women's racial and gendered identities and their educational and professional experiences would (a) provide insight about how to prepare, guide, and support Black women who aspire to the superintendency, and (b) improve the support and retention of those who are superintendents.

This research employed qualitative interviewing and ethnomethodology to collect qualitative data through interviews. As a researcher-participant, I employed autoethnography to render personal accounts related to my own educational and professional experience, as I aspire to the public school superintendency. Participants in the study included five Black women: one former superintendent, one current superintendent and three aspiring superintendents, including myself. The data were first coded, analyzed, and organized in light of the research question and the conceptual framework (see Appendix D) of intersectionality, and then by themes and categories from the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought. The study was based on the following research question: In what ways do the racial and gendered identities of Black women inform their educational and professional experiences on the path to the superintendency?

The research question was largely satisfied by the insights, findings, and themes presented in Chapter IV. This chapter provides a summary of the findings related to three themes, or key insights, discussed in Chapter IV. The summary of findings is organized by the following themes:

- i. Perceptions of Identity and Identities: Motivators and Inhibitors;
- ii. Non-traditional and Non-linear Educational and Career Pathways; and
- iii. Experience of Difference: Diversity, Struggle, and Activism

This chapter presents a more cohesive portrait of the findings to synthesize the connected experiences among the research participants, the ways that the participants explained and understood their experiences, the anticipated and unexpected connections, consistencies, and inconsistencies with the literature, and the ways in which the data extend beyond the literature. The theoretical framework of Black feminist thought and the intersectionality of race and gender, combined with literature relevant to race and gender in the superintendency and leadership, mentoring, bridge leadership, social justice, and identity politics were considered for this summary of findings.

The implications of the study's insights and findings are intended to augment the understanding of the ways that Black women's racial and gendered identities inform their educational and professional experiences while on the path to the public school superintendency. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications drawn from the study. The researcher's recommendations for practice, research, and policy are also provided. My concluding thoughts, as the researcher-participant, are rendered at the close of this chapter.

## **Summary of Findings by Theme**

Details about each participant's experiences as they relate specifically to the three key areas of insight are now presented. Each of the three major themes that emerged from the research is discussed individually before moving on to the concluding discussion of the implications for these findings.

### **Theme 1: Perceptions of Identity and Identities: Motivators and Inhibitors**

The overriding insight or finding of this study is that Black women's racial and gendered identities, and in some cases the intersection of these identities, did inform both their educational and professional experiences in several ways as they aspired to, and obtained, the superintendency. Racial and gendered identities inform understanding of race and gender stereotypes, oppressions, and ideological justifications (Collins, 2009).

The research question sought to identify the ways in which Black women's racial and gendered identities inform their experiences in educational and professional contexts. The participants revealed experiences in which they articulated a specific consciousness of how their identities as both Black and female exposed them to oppressions in the form of stereotypes that were specific to the intersecting oppressions of race and gender. As Hoyt (2007) contended, there is a propensity for African American women to experience greater negative stereotypes as a result of the combined effect of being female and Black.

Intersectionality focuses on those "who exist within the overlapping margins of race and gender discourse, it is a tool particularly adept at capturing and theorizing the simultaneity of race and gender as social processes" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 403). Similarly, Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) asserted that both sexism and racism may restrict opportunities for African American leaders.

The participants also reported experiences that were not indicative of the intersectionality of their racial and gendered identities. Some participants explained that they experienced independent racial or gendered stereotyping and oppressions that they attributed to either their race or gender. This factor was not aligned with the literature (Collins, 1998, 2009) which purports that aspects of identity mutually construct each other. In some cases, the participants did not report how being female influenced their experiences as Black or how being Black influenced their experiences as females. These experiences also aligned with the concept of *gendered racism* (Blake, 1999) in that the participants cannot or do not recognize or articulate experience of *gendered racism*.

The participants did report educational and professional experiences of stereotyping, bias, and discrimination that they attributed exclusively to their gendered identity. These insights did not appear to be congruent with the study results of Hoff and Mitchell (2008), as the women in their study perceived gender to be a non-issue. In some cases, the participants reported that their race, independently, resulted in racist stereotyping and discriminatory experiences.

The participants shared experiences in which they attributed their racial identity as the primary reason for negative stereotyping, bias, and discrimination. These insights were also not congruent with Alston's (2000, 2005) findings, as the superintendents in her study ranked gender and race lowest in their list of barriers or obstacles to the superintendency.

The participants did report their experiences that appeared to demonstrate their resistance to negative controlling images and stereotypes related to their race and gender. Their resistance and development of survival strategies were aligned with the literature



(Arnez, 1982; Hudson, Wess & Marcano, 1998; Revere, 1987). Their survival strategies, which related to the literature (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Jackson, 1999), included behaviors such as over-preparing, enhancing their professional skills, obtaining leadership credentials, and securing credibility in educational leadership. These survival strategies appeared to be exclusively tied to their racial and gendered identities.

The ethnomethodological aspects of the study provided insight into the participants' perspectives using hypotheticals insights suggesting how their experience might have been different if their identities had been those of a White male, a White female, or a Black male. All of participants reported that they believed their experiences would have been different, perhaps more positive and more free of negative racial and gendered stereotypes, if they had been White males. The participants appeared to be cognizant of the White male's privilege related to their identities as both male and White. While this may appear to be reverse stereotyping in action, nonetheless, it underscores the reality of White privilege, particularly White male privilege, that continues to permeate many areas of our society. In this case, the participants were simply acknowledging a set of circumstances which typically exert differing pressures on minority groups.

The participants varied in their perspectives of the advantages they felt might have occurred based on a White woman's identity. Ms. Sheen, the former superintendent, and Ms. McNeal, an aspirant, reported that they believed their experiences would have been different if they were White females. They both indicated that they would not have had to deal with the racial aspects of the experiences. Superintendent Roth explained that she did not believe her experiences would have been

different if she were a White woman, as she witnessed sexism in the superintendent selection process when a White woman, whom she believed to be highly qualified, was not selected for the superintendent position. Dr. Roth's perspective appeared to align with research (Brown, 2007) that asserted the perceptions of Black women are first associated with identity while those of White women are more related to skills.

Aspirant Lakewood reported that she believed her experiences would have been free of the struggle that Black woman encounter as a result of their racial and gendered identities, if she were a White woman. Ms. Lakewood adamantly proclaimed that she would not want to be a White woman. She believed "the struggle" experienced by Black women is a factor that makes them unique and supports the development of their strength to resist racial and gender stereotypes, discrimination, and biases, all of which are components of "the struggle." This struggle, however, does not necessarily make Black women superior or inferior to White women. It simply makes them different.

The participants indicated that they believed their experiences of gender stereotypes would also have been different if they were Black males. Aspirant Lakewood indicated that she believed Black men, in most cases, experienced even more discrimination than Black women. All participants indicated that Black men have historically been victims of racial and gender biases and discrimination, thus the Black males' racial and gendered identities would not save them from negative images and stereotypes. In this case, the Black female participants did not perceive gender and racial privileges for Black men.

Another ethnomethodological aspect of the study involved the participants' understanding of the rules and politics of the superintendency. The literature detailed

how the foundations of the superintendency were associated with the political aspects of education (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Harrison, Lowery, Hopsen & Marshall, 2004; Hess, 2002; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Kowalski, 2009; Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003). The aspirants reported that they were aware of the politics related to school districts and the positions. However, the aspirants were not as versed in what methods might be employed to navigate the politics. The former and current superintendents were cognizant of the politics of the superintendency and identity politics as they related to school board interactions. While the superintendents explained the political maneuvers (Alston, 1999) used in their practice, the aspirants reported that maneuvering school district politics would be an area in which they needed to grow.

The participants engaged in and articulated their experiences of struggle related to politics, similar to those identified by Alston (1999). For instance, the former superintendent, Ms. Sheen, spoke specifically about the identity politics she encountered while serving as a superintendent in a rural district that was predominately comprised of White students, staff, and school board members. She reported she had to constantly be cognizant of real and perceived alliances, affiliations, and relationships with various internal district staff and external community members.

Ms. Sheen used the strategy of maintaining a hyper-focus on gleaning support for the district's vision and mission that were informed by input from the internal and external publics of the district. Dr. Roth, the current superintendent expressed her strategy for navigating the politics involved in educating the children of district, faculty and staff, and the school board members. She indicated that she makes emotional appeals

to her internal and external public members to become engaged parents and partners in their children's education.

The literature (Alston, 2005; Tellarico & Blount, 2004) indicated that family responsibilities and family commitments were identified as barriers and constraints for Black women aspiring to, and serving in, the superintendency. The participants in this study did not reveal experiences that indicated that family aspects comprised either perceived or real barriers in their educational and professional pursuits on the path to the superintendency. In fact, it appeared that the participants were intentional in their use of strategies to integrate their work and life, thus forgoing the ideal of work-life balance.

All participants in the study shared experiences of oppressions that occurred in the form of stereotyping associated with their racial and gendered identities or the intersectionality of these identities. They experienced negative stereotyping (being from a single-parent home), bias (you walk in with something already written on your page), and racism and sexism (not hiring women now, losing a position to a Black male), all of which they felt were meant to inhibit their professional progress and achievement. It is my contention that the intersectionality of race and gender forms the *double-paned glass ceiling* in leadership that may impede upward mobility for Black women educational leaders, by obstructing access to the superintendency. However, it appeared that the participants were able to pierce the double-paned glass ceilings that were meant to inhibit their access in educational leadership by employing a variety of strategies. They acquired appropriate certifications, degrees and experience through hard work and determination. The participants appeared to embrace their racial and gendered identities and used their

experiences of racism and sexism as motivators in their educational and professional careers and pursuit of the superintendency.

## **Theme 2: Non-traditional and Non-linear Educational and Career Pathways**

A review of the participants' educational and professional profiles and experiences indicated they all followed non-traditional and non-linear pathways to their careers in education and public school educational leadership. Each participant reported that she did not initially pursue and attend college with the intent to become a classroom teacher or educational leader. However, each participant did report how their initial educational and professional careers led them to the field of education and educational leadership.

Specifically, former superintendent Sheen revealed that she had never been a classroom teacher; however, her interests were aligned with the field of education, as she was responsible for an educational program when she was a community specialist, prior to pursuing a degree in speech therapy. She also indicated that in her role as a speech therapist, she was not responsible for providing direct instruction to students, but she did provide services that supported students' instruction in the classroom.

Similarly, Superintendent Roth's career to educational leadership was initiated through her experience as a daycare teacher. She reported how she had worked as a daycare teacher for several years before being encouraged by the owner to pursue teaching. Dr. Roth subsequently became an elementary teacher.

Aspirant Lakewood reported how she used her initial career aspirations in the field of journalism as a springboard for her career as an educator. She served as a

journalism teacher. She also used her skills in communications in her position as a teacher of English language learners.

Aspirant McNeal's initial degrees were related to psychology and dance. She explained that her work with youth in an afterschool dance program sparked her interest in the field of education. She was inspired by the impact that a dance initiative had on students who participated in the afterschool program. When she became a middle school teacher, she initiated a similar program for the young men in her middle school.

I also had initial aspirations and career goals related to a degree in psychology. I aspired to work as a clinical psychologist for adolescents. I used my interests in psychology to support my career in the field of special education. I have worked as a special education teacher and district-level administrator and director for special education programs. The participants' entry points to education aligned with the literature, in the sense that their entry points varied from those of the majority of White male and female educators (Brunner & Kim, 2010).

The participants also shared the influence that their families had on their pursuit of education, educational degrees and certifications, and professional careers. Former Superintendent Sheen indicated that, as a public school student attending segregated schools, she was encouraged by her parents and Black female teachers to be a high achiever. Superintendent Roth reported how she did not attend college immediately following high school graduation; however, she had always been encouraged by her grandmother to pursue her education. Similarly, Aspirant McNeal revealed that as a Black female student in a single-parent household, her mother encouraged her to pursue higher education.

Aspirant Lakewood indicated that her father and mother encouraged her to pursue her college education. She indicated that her father directly instilled in her the importance of attaining a college education. She was indirectly motivated to pursue a college education by her mother, as she witnessed her mother struggle as a non-degreed, single parent after her mother and father divorced.

I had similar influences. Both my mother and father had always been strong proponents of education and were major supporters of my educational pursuits. The influence of the participants' families on their education was congruent with the literature that indicated the benefits that superintendents and aspirants derived from the support, encouragement, and motivation provided by family members (Alston, 1999; Bruner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Jackson, 1999; Tillman & Cochran, 2000).

The participants also reported how their educational pursuits and careers related to their families and their conceptualization of work-life balance. All participants reported that they did not believe they had achieved a balance between their work and family life obligations. Former Superintendent Sheen explained how she believed her position as a superintendent took her away from her children and may have negatively affected her first marriage. Superintendent Roth revealed that she worked hard to balance work and family, however, the competing priorities of work and family life have remained unbalanced.

Aspirant Lakewood also reported that she had been unable to balance work and personal life, even after she remarried. Similarly, Aspirant McNeal explained that she had not been able to balance the demands of being a single parent, doctoral student, and head of a household with two teenage sons. An interesting factor revealed in the data is

that all of the participants, with the exception of myself, had divorced at least once in their lives.

My autoethnographic account regarding my struggle with work-life balance revealed similarities with the challenges reported by the participants. All participants, including myself, had re-conceptualized work-life balance, as work-life integration, aligning with research conducted by Collins (2009).

The participants reported varied pathways to the superintendency. Their experiences supported Revere's (1987) study, wherein respondents did not identify a single career pattern to the superintendency. Superintendent Sheen pursued a career in communications in college and received a bachelor's degree in speech and hearing education. She started her career as a speech and hearing therapist, later served as a college guidance teacher, and then as a counselor in PK-12 schools. Her career also included considerable time as a community developer, prior to her work in PK-12 educational environments. It is remarkable that Ms. Sheen never served as a classroom teacher during her career in public school education. Ms. Sheen also held the position of principal and district curriculum director prior to obtaining her position as superintendent of schools.

Similarly, Superintendent Dr. Roth's career path to educational leadership was prompted by her experience as a daycare teacher. She later earned her college degree and teaching certificate, and served as an elementary classroom teacher, then advanced to the principalship. Dr. Roth subsequently moved from the position of assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction to the superintendency.



The aspirants also reported non-traditional educational and professional pathways. Aspirant Lakewood explained how her initial career aspiration as a journalist was reframed toward education. She pursued and obtained her teaching certifications via an alternative certification program. Aspirant Lakewood taught journalism in high school and later served as a teacher of secondary students learning English as a second language. She also worked as a district curriculum developer and then in the public school charter sector as a principal. Aspirant Lakewood served as a charter school assistant superintendent before moving to the position of executive director, a district-level administrative position in a traditional public school system.

Aspirant McNeal majored in psychology and dance in college. She provided dance instruction for students in after-school programs and later served as a tutor and mentor for the students. Her experiences working with school-aged students inspired her to pursue a teaching career in public schools. She later served as an assistant principal and then advanced into her current position as a district-level coordinator. She aspires to the superintendency and state educational positions.

While the participants revealed non-traditional career paths to educational leadership, they all served in positions that afforded them experiential preparation in the skills required for the superintendency. Brunner and Kim (2010) provided support for this insight when they indicated that:

Given the current focus on academic achievement, alternate routes to the superintendency may be superior to the historical norm. If the concept of school reform for enhancing students' achievement was fully reflected in educational administration/ superintendency hiring processes, the normal career paths leading

to the superintendency would include positions focused on curriculum and instruction positions most often filled by women. Clearly, if experiential preparedness in the area of instructional leadership is important, these women received essential leadership preparation. To be clear, experiential preparedness in the area of curriculum and instruction may be the most important career path acquisition, something that should be required for gaining a superintendency position. (p. 286)

As detailed in their aforementioned career profiles, participants appear to have the experiential preparedness and instructional leadership described by Brunner and Kim (2010). According to the authors, the career pathways for women are more complex and diverse than those of their male counterparts.

Brunner and Kim (2010) contended that one reason for this gendered difference in career paths is due to the dearth of entry positions into administration for women: “The lack of coaching and assistant administration positions may lead women to travel in diverse trails of career development rather than through traditional career paths to high levels of administration” (p. 291). The researchers indicated that because many women work in elementary schools, women do not have access to positions as coaches and assistant principals, which are more concentrated in secondary schools. It is important to note that only one participant, aspirant McNeal, served as an assistant principal in public schools. Although the participants in this study worked in elementary and secondary environments as teachers and administrators, they did not explicate the absence of coaching or assistant administrator positions as reasons for the diversity in professional pathways leading to educational leadership positions.

### **Theme 3: Experience of Difference: Diversity, Struggle, and Activism**

The participants' non-traditional career pathways, non-linear educational and professional backgrounds, and their racial and gendered identities appeared to be further aligned with their experience of difference, as related to diversity, struggle, and activism. The participants' experiences of certain aspects of gendered racism (Blake, 1999) appeared to guide their understanding of difference as a means for supporting diversity, being conscious of the struggles related to race and gender, and catalysts for their activism for others.

**Diversity.** All participants described experiences in which they were conscious of difference and, in most cases, responsive to diversity. Aspirant Lakewood reported that she believed diverse student populations needed her more than non-diverse populations. She was candid about her affinity for minority male students and male school leaders. Aspirant McNeal indicated that she preferred to work with diverse student populations. She explained that the diverse student populations she served were exposed to racially diverse staff. Ms. McNeal's community involvement with minority male students sparked her interest in becoming a public middle school teacher. Superintendent Roth explained that the racial diversity present in her family assisted her with understanding and supporting issues related to racial diversity within her district. Former Superintendent Sheen noted how her early educational experiences in segregated schools, which lacked diversity in student populations and staffing, supported her understanding of how to engage in environments that had limited demographic diversity.

The participants noted how their experiences of being mentored involved relationships that were forged with diverse racial and gendered advisors. During their

graduate academic pursuits, these relationships included few, if any, Black females. Earlier in their careers, working as teachers or campus-based staff, the participants revealed their mentors were females, mostly Black females, which related to bridge leadership (Horsford, 2011). The participants reported increased diversity in their mentors as they moved into educational leadership positions and during their pursuits of their graduate degrees.

Aspirant Lakewood revealed a negative experience when a White female leader mentored her while she was a district-level administrator. She explained how she used the experience to help her develop skills to be a supportive mentor. Aspirant McNeal reported that most of her professional mentors had been White, Black, and Hispanic males. Former superintendent Sheen and Superintendent Roth both reported that they were encouraged to pursue and obtain the superintendency because of support from their White male mentors. Only one participant, Ms. Sheen, reported participating in a formal mentor program during her first year in the superintendency. She also revealed that she did not benefit from that experience. Superintendent Roth indicated that she used her own networking systems to establish mentoring experiences with other practicing superintendents. These networking systems were aligned with the literature (Goffney & Edmonson, 2012) that reported the benefits of networks for Black women superintendents.

All of the participants recounted that they served as mentors to other educators and educational leaders. These experiences also aligned with the literature regarding bridge leadership (Horsford, 2011) as practiced and experienced by Black women. The participants explained the importance they placed on being supportive mentors and

providing coaching opportunities. Although the participants had limited experience with formal mentoring programs, they all agreed that mentoring for female educational leaders had benefits, as indicated in the literature (Alston, 1999; Goffney & Edmondson, 2012; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). They felt they would benefit from mentors who understand their experiences as racial and gendered educational leaders.

**Struggle.** Collins (2009) asserted that the Black woman's attempts to express the totality of self and establish positive self-definitions are components of Black women's recurring struggles. All participants revealed the struggle for self-identification as Black females in male and White male dominated educational and professional contexts.

Black women's resistance to race and gender oppressions could not have occurred without an associated struggle for group survival. Collins (2009) contended that without Black women's activism and struggles to sustain themselves as a group, transformations in educational, economic, and political institutions could not have been sustained: "Struggles for group survival require institutions that equip Blacks to struggle" (p. 219). The participants shared their experiences with activism, and with supporting difference and diversity during their struggles.

**Activism.** Former superintendent Sheen reported that she pursued educational administration so that she would have opportunities to make a difference for students. Ms. Sheen's activist approach in educational leadership aligned with those of the other participants. Superintendent Roth explained that the concepts of diversity and social justice should be taught to students, staff, and graduate students who are pursuing educational leadership.

Similar to Dr. Roth's shared recommendations, aspirant Lakewood suggested that educational leaders challenge practices and curricula that are not inclusive of diversity and social justice. Aspirant McNeal articulated her specific interest in, and support of, activism for students assigned to disciplinary alternative education placements. She indicated that the students in these placements were typically minorities and were oppressed because they were denied educational opportunities beneficial to their development.

The glass ceiling for White women represents an invisible barrier that closes them off from advancement. For Black women, it is more like a double-paned ceiling, representative of the dual barrier of being both female and Black. These combined constraints often block Black women's view of advancement opportunities and form a double-enforced barrier that requires extreme efforts to penetrate, if it can be penetrated at all.

The participants here suggested that their race and gender did inform oppressions and they provided examples of the forged ideological justifications provided for these oppressions. Aspirant Lakewood explained how her guidance counselor recommended that she pursue clerical occupations because this was the ideal career pathway for women. Aspirant McNeal reported that her school educators considered her an at-risk student because she was a child from a single-parent household, headed by a Black female. Former superintendent Sheen asserted that she was cast as a maid or Mammy in a college play because she was a Black woman. Most participants associated oppressive experiences with their race or gender, and in some cases, the simultaneity of their race and gender.

Participants recalled experiences in their educational and professional careers that related to the multiple-burden of race and gender, even when they did not articulate or perceived these experiences as such. However, these oppressions failed to thwart the aspirants' pursuits of the superintendency, and the superintendents' ascension to the position.

Black women are under-represented in educational leadership, specifically in the public school superintendency (Alston, 2005; Brunner, 2008; Gewertz, 2006; Revere, 1987). In general, women have been able to attain the position of superintendent, but there continues to be a disparity in the number of Black women superintendents. This under-representation appears to have contributed to the limited discourse surrounding Black women's aspirations for, ascension to, and service in, the superintendency. The insight gained from the participants' experiences has merit in understanding their individual experiences and those of other Black female leaders, or leaders who experience challenges and barriers related to race and gendered identities. In summary, the study has implications for practice, research, and policy.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

This study has many implications for women, Black women, minority men and women school district administrators, and for those administrators who currently practice or pursue the public school superintendency. The study also has implications for educational leadership and doctoral programs that prepare school district leaders for roles such as the superintendency. Further, there are implications for superintendent aspirants who pursue the position and the researchers who choose to study the superintendency.

The following section details the implications and recommendations for practice, research, and policy.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The first implication for practice derived from this study concerns the role of the superintendent and leadership program administrators. Educational leaders can use this study's findings to increase their awareness of the unique racial and gendered identity issues that confront Black women leaders. I would recommend that educational program administrators and professors work to diversify the discourse used within the superintendency preparation and graduate programs. Course readings might include research conducted by Bjork (2008), *Preparing the next generation of superintendents: Integrating professional and experiential knowledge*; Brunner (2008), *Invisible, limited, and emerging discourse: Research practices that restrict and/or increase access for women and persons of color in the superintendency*; Collins, (2009), *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller and Thomas, (1995); Dantley and Tillman (2010), *Social justice and moral transformative leadership*; Gammill, and Vaughn (2011), *Lessons for a rural female superintendent: Gender, leadership, and politics*; Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), *Women and educational leadership*; Gilligan (1992), *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*; hooks (2000), *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*; Horsford (2011), *Learning in a burning house: Educational inequality, ideology, and (dis)integration*; Marshall and Oliva (2006), *Leadership for social justice: Making revolutions in education*; McClellan, Ivory, & Dominguez (2008), *Distribution of influence, communication and relational mentoring in the U. S. superintendency*; Tillman (2003), *From rhetoric to reality? Educational administration and the lack of racial and*



*ethnic diversity within the profession*; Tillman (2012), *Inventing ourselves: An informed essay for Black female scholars in educational leadership*; and Waite, Nelson, and Guajardo (2007), *Teaching and Leadership for Social Justice and Social Responsibility: The Struggle Begins at Home*.

It is recommended that Black women superintendents and aspirants be provided opportunities to share their perspectives about how their racial and gendered identities have informed their educational and professional experiences with graduate students. A starting point is to include foundational studies that highlight the experiences of minority superintendents and aspirants, such as the discourses by Alston (1999, 2005), Hudson, Wesson and Marcano (1998), Jackson (1999), Revere (1987) and Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000). All of these studies support exposure to diverse discourse.

Given currently limited research about the educational and professional experiences of Black women superintendents and aspirants, it is imperative that Black women who aspire to the superintendency be provided research that is inclusive of their voices, perspectives, and inquiries about how their racial and gendered identities influence their experiences. Additionally, leadership preparation programs should provide female and male practitioners with discourse related to the barriers, challenges, and struggles that may impede them, in addition to information about their aspirations, ascension, and the successful practice by women and minorities in school district leadership. Suggested courses include such topics for study as: Diversity-Responsive Leadership: Theory, Research and Practice; Critical Consciousness within Diverse Demographics; Socially Constructed and Intersectional Identities; Culturally Responsive Research Methods; and Contributions of Diverse Leaders, Practitioners and Scholars.

The insights of this study, as detailed in Chapter V, addressed the ways in which Black women leaders' racial and gendered identities informed their consciousness and interpretations of oppression experienced in their educational and professional environments. While the insights document the oppressive experiences of Black women superintendents and aspirants, their experiences also acknowledge the struggle and activism that result from their experiences of racial and gendered oppression. As the insights and findings detailed, the non-linear, non-traditional career pathways, work-life experiences, professional relationships, and unique mentoring relationships these Black women leaders have developed on the trajectory to the superintendency have enabled them to meet unexpected challenges and demonstrate their ability to perform successfully. These experiences supported their construction of work-life integration as an alternative to work-life balance. As such, this study provides clues as to how best to prepare and support Black female leaders in school district leadership.

The findings may offer ideas regarding specific preparation mechanisms that support Black women educational leaders in bridging theory and practice in leadership (Sarason, 2004; Waite & Nelson, 2009) to resolve the racial and gender challenges, navigate barriers, and re-conceptualize work-life balance. I would recommend that educational leadership programs, their faculty, and administrators consider mechanisms and processes to ensure formal mentoring programs and opportunities. The mentoring process would begin with a required practicum that would span a full school year. These mentoring programs should be inclusive of the achievement of goals related to practice and performance in leadership positions.

## **Implications and Recommendations for Research**

One implication that could be drawn from this study is related to the development and use of culturally-sensitive research methods. Although there has been research explicating the challenges of, barriers to, and benefits for Black women in the superintendency, few, if any, studies included autoethnography, ethnomethodology, qualitative interviewing methods, or a bricolage of methods for critical inquiry. The incorporation of bricolage in this study as a research method may inspire other researchers to consider its use, or the use of at least one method that has not been widely employed before.

This study employed methods that have not been used, or used minimally, to research the experiences and perspectives of Black women educational district leaders. As such, I employed bricolage, which in this case included different methodological and interpretive perspectives, to collect and analyze the data. This study makes a contribution to qualitative inquiry, in that bricolage, or a variety of methods, were employed to create critical, culturally-sensitive discourse. As Tillman (2002) contended:

In the absence of culturally-sensitive research approaches, there will continue to be a void in what the larger research community knows and understands about the education of African Americans and how African Americans understand and experience the world. (p. 4)

The autoethnographic aspect of this study has the potential to produce discourse that highlights personal experiences as meaningful research, while also emphasizing and engaging experience through a different lens. With a focus on the methods, norms, and understandings people use to realize their experiences and actions, the

ethnomethodological insights regarding how participants understand the political nature of the superintendency, and the impact of their racial and gendered identities, provide insights into how Black women educational leaders bridge theory and practice (Waite, 2009), as racial and gendered leaders. The qualitative interviews have provided some clarity regarding mentoring in educational leadership and how and why bridge leadership (Horsford, 2012) could serve as an effective mentoring, network, and support model for Black women educational leaders.

The findings of this study may contribute to the body of research literature that ought to help school district leaders and educational scholars better understand preparation and support mechanisms for Black women's purposeful work at the nexus of theory and practice. A specific recommendation is to actively identify and support opportunities for researchers interested in the public school superintendency to connect formally. While there are special interest groups associated with some national research entities, these groups need to be expanded and challenged to explore the implications associated with the intersectionality of gender and race, particularly as it impacts Black women's aspirations to pursue educational leadership roles, and their eventual ability to succeed in such positions.

I recommend that symposiums and formal, annual meetings be convened for researchers, special interest group members, and practitioners to maintain the research agenda regarding the public school superintendency. These symposiums and meetings would afford researchers opportunities to present their related studies, glean additional topics for study, and ensure that discourse about the superintendency is more readily accessible to researchers and scholar-practitioners. A meta-analysis of research

concerning the public school superintendency is needed. I recommend that the special interest group commission collaborative qualitative and quantitative research efforts to produce demographic, practice, and perspective data about the public school superintendency and Black women.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Policy**

A policy implication that can be derived from this study is related to exposing the legacy of racism and sexism that continues to plague Black women educational leaders. Revealing the presence and prevalence of racism and sexism, and the intersection of these phenomena, have implications for the structures, systems, and processes used for succession, selection, and support of Black women superintendents and aspirants. As this study documented, Black women in the role of superintendent, and superintendent aspirants, may not always be aware of their activism for difference, but they are in a position to develop and promote policies that benefit all children, especially the children of diverse races, ethnicities, and experiences.

I recommend that Black women be encouraged to challenge policies and procedures related to the practices of school district leadership that do not support equity or value diversity. Black women and policy makers should be supported in navigating systems, structures, and policies that impede or complicate their navigation of the superintendency pathway. To address issues related to accessible demographics for public school superintendents, I recommend that a policy be developed that requires reporting the educational and professional demographics of all superintendents, nationally, and in each state. These national and state-wide reporting policies would

support the documentation and monitoring of all representations of educational leaders, while also revealing underrepresentation based on gender, race, and ethnicity.

The licensing and certifying of current and aspiring superintendents should also be reported nationally and statewide. Universities, colleges, and educational administration programs would be responsible for data collection and reporting these data to state education service centers. These reports would facilitate data maintenance for reporting and monitoring aspirations, ascensions, and tenure in the superintendency. Additionally, these reporting mechanisms and data would serve as resources for researchers and practitioners.

This study yielded research insights and findings that may be more accessible to diverse audiences, making personal and social change possible for more people (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, et al., 2011; Goodall, 2008; hooks, 1994). The methods and insights of this study have surely expanded my knowledge as both researcher, and participant. Through the autoethnographic glimpses and documented accounts of Black women's educational and professional leadership experiences, readers of this study may connect with the participants' stories and locate other units of analysis to interrogate how race, gender, and the intersection of these social constructs inform educational and professional experiences in school district leadership such as the superintendency.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

While some studies have considered the preparation, recruitment, ascension, mentoring, retention, and exit of Black women into and from the superintendency, this study captured the perspectives of five Black women educational leaders comprised of one former, one current, and three aspiring superintendents, including myself. The study

participants detailed how their racial and gendered identities informed their educational and professional experiences while in the position and on the trajectory to the superintendency. This study specifically examined Black women's perspectives regarding the impact of their race and gender on their educational and professional experiences on the superintendency career path, so that the superintendency as a leadership context has additional perspectives, distinct from the predominant perspectives of the White males and White females who have hitherto occupied the position.

The study acknowledges the leadership experiences of five Black women who have demonstrated attributes of Black women's leadership. According to Tillman, in the forward to *Black Women in Leadership: Their Historical and Contemporary*

*Contributions:*

The promises of Black female leadership: strength, resilience, intelligence, beauty and a boundless determination to make a difference. Let us applaud them and all Black women who are leaders in all walks of life, who, despite circumstances, always rise, rise, rise! (Davis & Chaney, 2013, p. vii)

These promises are indicative of the strength, resilience, intelligence, beauty, and boundless determination to make a difference that many Black women leaders demonstrate in their educational and professional experiences, as they rise in the leadership ranks and navigate the pathway of the public school superintendency (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2011; Jackson, 1999; Rivers, 2007). Black women's racial and gendered identities inform their consciousness (Anzaldúa, & Morago, 1983; Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981, 2000; Lorde, 1995) and contribute to their realization and enactment of these promises in their leadership experiences (Allen, 2000; Jones &

Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Mullings, 2006; Willie, 2003), their work-life, and educational attainment (Daniel, 2007; Houston, 2001; Patton, 2009), and leadership experiences (Alston, 1999, Daye, 2007; Jones, 2003; Gayles-Johnson, 2013).

The effects and impact of the promises of Black women's leadership have been represented in the literature by Black women scholars and practitioners. Foundational work by Jackson (1999) examined the benefits of Black women serving in administrative roles and the multiple factors that influenced their success in these roles (Alston, 1999, 2000). In a contextualization of research about Black women leaders who successfully advanced social justice agendas in education, Horsford (2012) highlighted how the intersection of race and gender served as a catalyst for Black women leaders' bridge leadership for others, to others, and between others. Alston (2005) maintained that "Black female educators and Black female superintendents, however small in number, demonstrate that they are well prepared to lead" (p. 681).

Although the benefits of Black women's leadership and their contributions to school district leadership contexts have been explored and explicated in empirical research (Alston, 2005; Jackson, 1999), there is still a need to ask why the public school superintendency has traditionally remained a position that is minimally accessible to, and rarely occupied by, Black women.

Historically, the dominant culture has created the discourse and presented the images and narratives about Black women leaders. Many of these portraits substantiated the deficit thinking, racial discrimination, sexism, and/or marginalization that permeated Black women's leadership experiences. Some experiential accounts and literary visuals



laden with deficits have been interpreted, moreover misinterpreted, as predominant portraits of Black women's leadership.

I recommend that future research and published discourse continue to address and include Black women's perspectives and perceptions of educational leadership and the superintendent's role. The methods that Black women employ to navigate the pathway to the superintendency, Black women's sense-making about this career path, and their leadership experiences related to the position of the superintendency also merit critical examination. As such, the empirical data and research literature documenting the experiences and voices of Black women superintendents and Black women who aspire to the public school superintendency must be addressed, transformed, and expanded.

## **APPENDIX SECTION**

### **APPENDIX A**

## APPENDIX A

### Demographic Profiles of the Research Participants

	Ms. Sheen* <i>Former Superintendent</i>	Dr. Roth* <i>Current Superintendent</i>	Ms. Lakewood* <i>Aspiring Superintendent</i>	Ms. McNeal* <i>Aspiring Superintendent</i>	Researcher <i>Aspiring Superintendent</i>
Age	62	55	52	37	44
Highest Degree Earned	M.A.	Ed.D.	M.A.	M. Ed.	M.A.
Major	Administration	Adm. Leadership	Adm. Leadership	Ed. & Org. Admin.	Ed Adm.
College Geo. Loc.	Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas
Educational Degrees & *Certifications Earned	BS-Speech & Lang Therapy MA-Counseling MA-Admin. *Counseling *Superintendent	Assoc.Degree BA-Elem. Ed. MS.-Curr. & Instr. *Superintendent *Admin.	BA-Elem. Ed. *MA-Admin. *ESL *Lang. Arts	BA-Dance *MA-Principal, Language Arts (4-8), Reading (4-8), Dance	BA-Psychology *MA-Admin. *Superintendent Supervision *Special Ed.
Highest Degree Pursued	MA-Retired	Ed.D.-Earned	Ed.D.	Ed.D.	Ph.D.
Positions Held Prior To Educational Career	Community Education Director	Day Care Teacher	Journalism, Adjunct Professor	Professional Dev. Coord., Community Dance Instructor, Dance Coordinator, PR Director	Grant Writer, Lab Assistant, Mental Health Assistant, Child Care Assistant
Current Position	Retired	Superintendent	District Ex. Director	District Coordinator	Asst. Supt
Type/Size of District	Rural/Small	Suburban/Small	Urban/Large	Urban/Large	Urban/Large
Demographics for Current Position: Percentage of Race- Superintendent/Students/ Staff/Colleagues AA-African American H-Hispanic, W-White O-Other	Sup=* Students= AA/7, H/13, W/73, O/2 Staff= AA/3, H/3, W/91, O/2 Colleg.= White/M & F	Sup= * Students= AA/30, H/41, W/25, O/4 Staff= AA/10, H/10, W/77, O/1.4 Colleg.= White/M & F	Sup=Male/Black Students=* Staff=* Colleagues= M- Hispanic, Black F-Hispanic, White & Black	Sup= Male/Black Students=* Staff=* Colleagues= M- Hispanic, Black F-Hispanic, White & Black	Sup= Male/Black Students=* Staff=* Colleagues M- White, Hispanic, Black F-Hispanic, White & Black
Yrs. Of Experience in Education	28	26	24	13	23

(Appendix A continued)

	Ms. Sheen* <i>Former Superintendent</i>	Dr. Roth* <i>Current Superintendent</i>	Ms. Lakewood* <i>Aspiring Superintendent</i>	Ms. McNeal* <i>Aspiring Superintendent</i>	Researcher <i>Aspiring Superintendent</i>
Pathway of Experience in Education: Recent to Past	Interim Superintendent, Special Programs Director, Director of Curriculum, Principal, Counselor, Careers Instructor, Speech & Hearing Instructor	Assist. Sup. for Curriculum & Instruction, Principal ES, Teacher-ES	Senior Director, Principal, ESL Specialist, Reading Specialist, Adjunct Professor, HS Journalism Teacher, ESL Teacher (elementary and secondary)	Literacy Coach, ILC, V-Principal, Assoc. Principal, Instr. Facilitator, Admin. Intern., Adjunct Professor, Summer Sch. Principal, MS ELA Teacher	Ex. Dir, Director, Interim Assist. Sup., Curric. & Instruct, Bilingual, Tech. Coord., Principal-ES & MS, Charter School Director, ACT Instruct., Dept. Chair, SPED Teacher-HS
Professional Mentors: Gender & Race	Male/White	Male & Female White	Male & Female White	Male/Black, Hispanic, White	Females- Black & Hispanic Males- Black, Hispanic, White
Educational Mentors: Gender & Race	Females/Black	Females/Black	Females/Black & Hispanic	Male/Black, Hispanic, White	Females & Males/Black, Hispanic, White
Years as Superintendent	4	7	*	*	*
District Type & Size	Rural/ 1025	Rural/2100	*	*	*
Parents/Guardians During Education	Married	Married Grandparents	Married Single Mother	Single Mother	Married
Type of Schools Attended in HS/MS/ES	Public- Segregated	Public-Integrated	Private- H & W Public-Integrated	Public-Predominately White	Public-Integrated
Marital Status	Married	Married	Divorced/Single	Separated/Single	Married
Marital Status- Admin. Positions	Married	Married	Married/Single	Married/Single	Married
Number of Marriages	2	2	2	1	1
Number of Children	2	1	4	2	3
Ages/Grades of Children Currently	Adults	Adult	3-Adults & 1-HS	2-Middle School	1-College, 1-HS & 1-ES

*All names are pseudonyms* \* = Not Applicable

## **APPENDIX B**

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

1. Please tell me about yourself. Detail your leadership roles and aspirations.
2. What factors influenced your decision to become an educator, administrator and superintendent (former superintendent)?
3. Why do you want to be a superintendent? (superintendent aspirants)
4. As a Black/African American woman, how has your race and gender identity shaped your educational and professional experiences? (identity and identities)
5. Do you think that things would have been different for you if you were a White Male? White female?
6. Do you think that things would have been different for you if you were a Black Male?
7. What do you understand to be the politics associated with a job like the superintendency?
8. In what ways do you believe you were prepared for the politics of the superintendency
9. What educational and demographic contexts have framed your professional experiences?
10. Tell me about the places that you have worked?  
  
Student/Staff/Superintendent/School Board Demographics (race), school board-politics, conservative/liberal stance of the board, race & gender of superintendent, colleagues, your supervisor-race & gender students served.
11. Describe your mentor (s) and detail your mentoring experiences?

12. How do you balance your work life and personal life?
13. How do you use research to inform your work?
14. What responsibility, if any, do you have to students of diversity or social justice?
15. There's a lot of talk about diversity and social justice in education. What do these terms mean to you? (Operationalizing social justice, enacting social justice to combat injustice)
16. How could leadership prep programs do a better job preparing Black/African American women for leadership positions, like the public school superintendency.
17. There are so many hot issues in Educational Leadership, such as Social Justice, Cultural Diversity, Pre-Kindergarten, Common Core Curriculum and Standards, Testing & Accountability) what do you see as the future of the field and practice?

## APPENDIX C



## APPENDIX C

### Glossary of Terms

**Activism.** Efforts that promote, impede, direct or change status.

**Advocacy.** The active support of an idea or cause.

**Agency.** An individual or social group's will to be self-defining and self-determining (

**African-American.** A term that describes an American citizen of African descent and especially of Black African descent born in the United States. For the purposes of this study, the term will be used interchangeably with the term Black.

**Black.** A term that describes individuals having dark skin, relating to any of various population groups having dark pigmentation of the skin, relating to the African American people or their culture.

**Bridge Leadership.** A term used to describe how the intersection of race and gender as experienced by Black women leaders, has resulted in Black women serving as bridge for others, to others and between others in multiple and complicated contexts over time (Horsford, 2011).

**Cognitive Load.** A concept based on cognitive load theory that distinguishes three different types of cognitive load. Intrinsic cognitive load relates to inherent characteristics of the content to be learned, extraneous cognitive load is the load that is caused by the instructional material used to present the content, and finally, germane cognitive load refers to the load imposed by learning processes (Ton Je Long, 2010).

**Empowerment.** The use of education to teach people how to be self-reliant and the rejection of models of authority based on unjust hierarchies (Collins, 2009).

**Ethnicity.** A term that represents social groups with a shared history, sense of identity, geography, and cultural roots that may occur despite racial differences.

**Gender/Sex.** This/these terms encompass the social expectations associated with femininity and masculinity, grounded in the biological/anatomical distinctions between women and men.

**Glass Ceiling.** A political term used to describe the unseen and un-breakable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements.

**Identity.** The aspect of self that stands in relationship to social groups or categories of which an individual is a member (Frable, 1997; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

**Identity Politics.** A way of knowing which views lived experiences as important to creating knowledge and crafting group-based political strategies (Collins, 2009).

**Intersectionality.** Analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, sexuality, nation, age and ethnicity form mutually constituting features of social organization, shaping, in this case, Black women's experiences and, in turn, being shaped by them (Crenshaw, 1989 and Collins, 2009).

**Mentor.** A person who acts as an advocate and provides knowledge about an organization and offers strategies for success within the organization (Tillman & Cochran, 2000).

**Mentoring.** The concept of matching a novice school leader with a veteran guide. A long-term relationship that involves a career-changing process for both the mentor and the protégé (Gross, 2009).

**Oppositional Knowledge.** A type of knowledge developed by, for, and/or in defense of an oppressed group's interests. Ideally, it fosters the group's self-definition and self-determination (Collins, 2009).

**Oppression.** An unjust situation where, systemically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, age and ethnicity constitute major forms of oppression (Collins, 2009).

**Outsider-within locations.** Social locations or border spaces marking the boundaries between groups of unequal power. Individuals acquire identities as "outsiders within" by their placement in these social locations (Collins, 2009).

**Race.** The socially constructed meaning attached to a variety of physical attributes, including but not limited to skin and eye color, hair texture, and bone structures of people.

**Racial Solidarity.** The belief that members of a racial group have common interests and should support one another above the interests of members of other racial groups (Collins, 2009).

**Social Justice Project.** An organized, long term effort to eliminate oppression and empower individuals and groups for a more just society (Collins, 2009).

**Subjugated Knowledge(s).** The secret knowledges generated by oppressed groups. Such knowledge typically remains hidden because revealing it weakens its purpose of assisting them to deal with oppression. Subjugated knowledges that aim to resist oppression constitute oppositional knowledges (Collins, 2009).

**Superintendent.** The chief executive officer of a school district employed by a board of directors.

**Superintendency.** The office, post or jurisdiction of the superintendent.

**Work-life Balance.** The idea that a connected and social work environment that fosters career fulfillment also allows for a personal life outside of professional responsibilities.

**Work-life Integration.** An understanding that “work life” and “personal life” are so mixed that there is avoidance of separating work and life into separate spheres, instead a space is located that allows both, without neglecting either.

## **APPENDIX D**

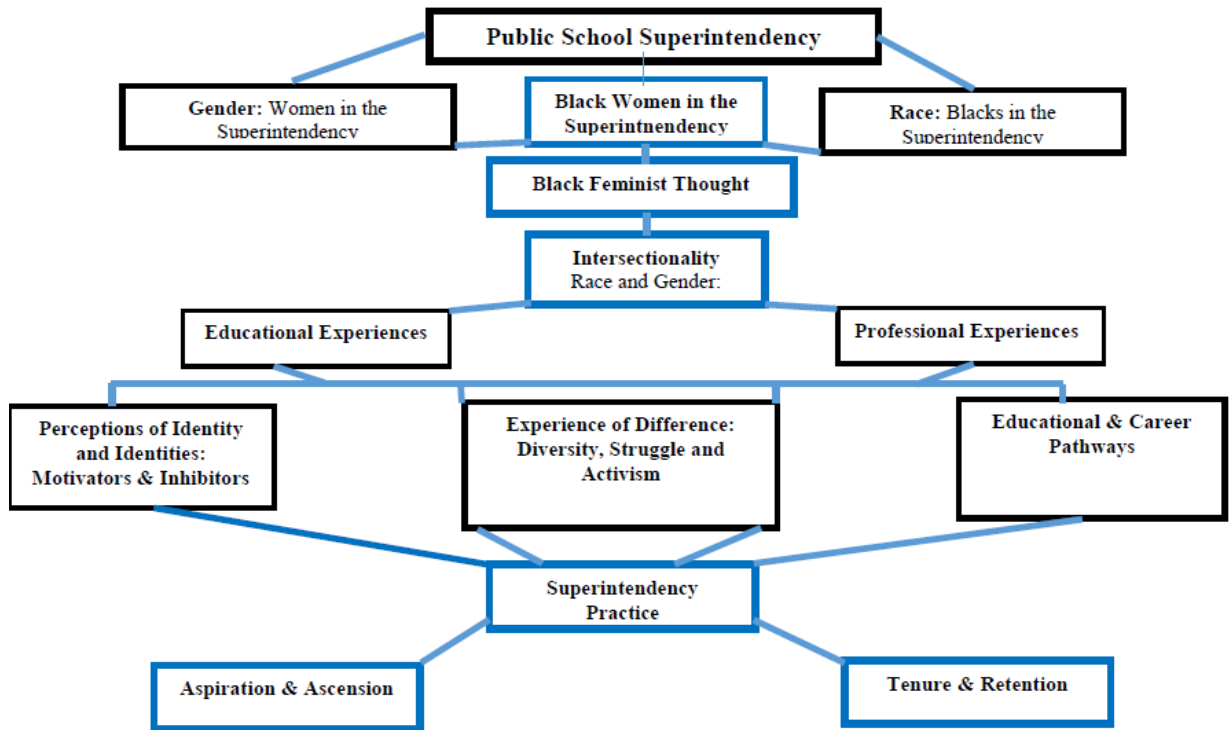
## APPENDIX D

### Conceptual Framework

**Research Question:** In what ways do the racial and gendered identities of Black women inform their educational and professional experiences on the path to the superintendency?

**Study Themes:**

1. Perceptions of Identity and Identities: Motivators and Inhibitors
2. Non-Traditional and Non-Linear Educational and Career Pathways
3. Experience of Difference: Diversity, Struggle and Activism



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