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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, *BLESSED ASSURANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS LEADING WITH CONVICTION*, by TANISHA CHAMEL FRAZIER, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

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**BLESSED ASSURANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES
OF BLACK WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS LEADING WITH CONVICTION**

by

TANISHA FRAZIER

Under the Direction of Dr. Yinying Wang

ABSTRACT

The public school superintendency has historically been held by White males. Given the disproportionate representation of Black women in the position, this study explored their lived experiences, including the intersectionality of race and gender, to further understand the problem. Hermeneutical phenomenology was used to understand and interpret the essence of the lived experiences of the six participants. Data were gleaned from semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modification of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Phenomenological Data Analysis. The findings revealed barriers and challenges Black women encounter throughout life and while serving in the position such as overcoming racial and gender discrimination in childhood and the workplace. The findings also revealed their motivation to lead and the impact of their lived experiences on their leadership. Patterns of success such as improving student outcomes, longevity in the position, and positively impacting climate were also found. Strategies for success such as relying on their faith and family arose as sources of strength. I also propose a

new leadership theory to describe the characteristics Black women superintendents possess and how they respond when faced with discrimination.

This study contributes to the research depicting the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the Southeast. Practical implications such as mentorship, a leadership pipeline, and diversity of school board members are recommended. Policy implications such as required training for new superintendents and board members are also suggested. The results of this study will benefit Black women aspiring to the superintendency and those serving in positions of support for Black women superintendents.

INDEX WORDS: intersectionality, phenomenology. Black women superintendents, Black feminist thought, Spiritual Resistance theory

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in

Educational Leadership

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education & Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2024

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Edward, thank you for encouraging me to pursue this degree and providing consistent support pushing me forward in moments when I almost gave up. I could not have completed this dissertation without you by my side. I love you and I am grateful to be on this journey called life with you.

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1 THE PROBLEM

For the past 25 years, researchers have investigated women and the superintendency (Kowalski, 2011). Since the inception of the position, it has been primarily held by White males. Given this history of disproportionate representation of women in the superintendency, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Black women serving as public school superintendents, as well as investigate the role of the intersectionality of gender and race as evidenced by their lived experiences.

Women make up about 80% of the teaching profession (White, 2023). However, males comprise a large majority of the top executive positions within school districts, specifically the position of superintendent. About 72% of superintendents in U.S. public schools are male (White, 2023). Even more alarming is the underrepresentation of Black women in the superintendency. It is difficult to know the exact percentage of Black women serving as superintendents because there is no consistent method for tracking these figures (Suggs Mason, 2021). However, Kowalski (2011) reported that only about 2% of superintendents were Black women (Kowalski, 2011). According to the Georgia School Superintendent website, in 2022 of 191 superintendents, there were eight Black women superintendents. According to White (2023), while superintendent turnover has increased, the gender gap in superintendency has narrowed over the past four years with men making up 72% of superintendents in 2022-23 as opposed to 74% in 2019-20. While the number of women superintendents is increasing, Black women are still disproportionately represented. Additionally, since there is a disproportionately small number of Black women superintendents, there is also limited research (Kowalski, 2011) that addresses the lived experiences of Black women superintendents. Disproportionate representation of Black women in the position of superintendent is problematic for several reasons. The absence of Black women in the

position creates a void in our voices being heard at the top level. Black women hold unique perspectives and experiences that could advance the work of schools. Not including our talents at the highest level could impact children. In communities with high populations of children of color, students need to see those who look like them holding all positions, including the position of superintendent. Another issue with the underrepresentation is the fact that women have been stereotyped as less capable in higher career positions. This lack of representation further perpetuates the stereotype. Additionally, the lack of representation limits the number of mentors available to Black women aspirants. Finally, the lack of representation limits the depth of research on the lived experiences of Black women in the role. Brown (2014) argued the need for continued research documenting the lived experiences of Black women superintendents. She claimed the voices of Black women superintendents are often shared by White women and Black men. Several questions exist regarding this problem. These questions could be asked of participants that may inform Black women about the motivations, perceived barriers, and strategies of becoming a superintendent. Why does the problem exist? Do Black women wish to attain the position? What are the barriers or challenges prohibiting Black women from securing the position? What strategies have been used by Black women while serving in the position? What motivating factors caused Black women to seek or remain in the position? These questions are important to answer as this underrepresentation of the Black woman's voice at the top level impacts all stakeholders. Black women hold unique experiences and perspectives that are needed to advance the work of schools. We can be a contributing factor in addressing disproportionate outcomes in student achievement within the school districts. Previous research indicates a need for continued research regarding the lived experiences of Black women superintendents.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Black women in the position of superintendent in the Southeast. Phenomenology focuses on direct experiences with participants to describe the essence of their lived experiences (Hays and Singh, 2012). The study also aimed to look for themes to garner collective understanding by utilizing multiple participants. The study aimed to add to the body of knowledge and further understand the underrepresentation of Black women in the position of superintendent. The study provides valuable information to equip future aspirants with strategies and information to help them obtain and remain in the position.

Social constructivism was the paradigm for the research. Ontologically, social constructivist thought attends to the idea that there are multiple perspectives regarding a phenomenon. Therefore, the study was designed to capture the lived experiences of at least six Black women superintendents in various areas of the southeast to hear multiple perspectives. Epistemologically, participants and I co-constructed knowledge that helps to further explain the underrepresentation of Black women in the position of superintendent. Both voices are essential in adding to the findings and further explaining the problem.

Key terms

Lived experiences, in this study, refer to a person's first-hand experiences. They can be made up of their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and attitudes towards their place.

Phenomenology refers to a qualitative research tradition in which the goal is to discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants' lived experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Intersectionality describes how systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories (Crenshaw, 2019).

Research question

The study sought to answer the following research question:

- (1) What are the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the Southeast?

Significance of the Study

The study aimed to add to the body of research on the lived experiences of Black women superintendents and provide insight on the topic of underrepresentation of Black women in various superintendent positions such as superintendent, assistant superintendent, area superintendent, or deputy superintendent. Since there is a disproportionately small number of Black women in the superintendent position, other types of superintendents were included in the possible study population. Regardless of the type of superintendent position, there is limited research that addresses the lived experiences of Black women superintendents (Revere, 1985; Alston, 1999; Angel et al., 2013). In 2013, Angel et al. conducted a literature review and revealed the fact that little research has been completed on the focus of the Black woman superintendent. Also, recently conducted research revealed a need for continued research on the lived experiences of Black women superintendents (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Suggs Mason, 2021). While the topic is not new, there is also limited research conducted in the southeastern area of the United States. Examining and highlighting the lived experiences of Black women serving as superintendents can shed light and potentially help to create solutions for the problem of underrepresentation of Black women in the superintendency. This study brings forth the unique experiences of Black women superintendents. The study identifies barriers, challenges, and even successes of the participants. Aspiring superintendents and those able to serve as mentors/support for those in the position can learn valuable lessons for future work. As a Black woman in educational leadership, the study was also personally significant. I also realized my own experiences could have introduced bias. It was

important for me to bracket my experiences. For me, this meant utilizing a reflexive journal to make note of assumptions and biases to keep them from interfering with the research study. Phenomenological researchers bracket their values or assumptions to gain insight into the phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). This idea is also supported by Moustakas (1994) as he described the process of Epoche. Epoche requires the researcher to set aside preconceived notions, biases, and prejudgments. One way of attending to this is reflexive journaling. Hays & Singh (2012) asserted that qualitative researchers need to be reflexive. Therefore, I utilized journaling throughout the research project to capture my thoughts and feelings in response to the participants' sharing in interviews. The study provided a close look into the barriers and challenges Black women faced while serving in the position, providing relevant information for those seeking the superintendency in the future. Knowing the barriers and challenges could provide helpful information for school districts to be more equitable in their hiring and retention practices. Finally, the study provides information for school districts or other individuals who can provide mentorship and support superintendents to improve retention.

Limitations and Delimitations

Qualitative research aims to provide a rich description of an individual or group's experience to further explain a phenomenon. This naturalistic nature of qualitative research causes a threat to generalizability (Hays & Singh, 2012). Additionally, due to the small number of Black women superintendents, the findings of this study are limited. However, since the experiences of Black women are unique, the focus was placed on Black women.

The findings of this study are limited to a small number of participants involved. Another delimitation was restricting the geographic location to the southeast. Placing additional criteria

such as several years serving in the superintendency placed additional limits on the study. I will discuss the limitations and delimitations more in Chapter Five.

Organization of the Study

The study is organized through five chapters, with the first being this introductory chapter. Chapter One describes the problem of underrepresentation of Black women in the position of superintendent in U.S. public schools. A connection is made between the underrepresentation and the lived experiences of women who have served in the position. The chapter shares the research question to be answered throughout the research. Chapter One also describes the research tradition of phenomenology. Additionally, the chapter provides definitions of key terms and briefly describes the procedure used in the study. Finally, Chapter One also provides the significance and limitations of the study.

Chapter Two shares the reviewed, related literature. The literature review includes information on assorted topics and shares previously researched women superintendents, the role of gender and race on the lived experiences of women in the superintendency, barriers, and challenges of Black women superintendents, and numerous phenomenological studies. Reviewing the literature allowed me to discover the research gaps.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used in the study. The purpose of the study and research design are also explained. The research questions are also provided in this chapter. Detailed descriptions of the researcher's role, sample, and how participants were selected are included in this chapter. Finally, the chapter discusses the specifics of the procedures, data collection, and how the data was analyzed. The chapter closes with details related to trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

The study concludes with Chapters Four and Five. In Chapter Four, the findings are shared through five common themes identified during the data collection and analysis. Chapter Five includes a connection to previously conducted research, a discussion of implications, and suggestions for future inquiry.

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Moustakas (1994) discussed the use of literature in a phenomenological study as framing the research problem and setting the stage for the inquiry. Therefore, the study began with a review of relevant literature. Disproportional representation of women in the position of superintendent has been documented for decades (Kowalski, 2011). Not only are women underrepresented, but Black women are also more underrepresented than other minority groups. This review analyzed previously conducted research relevant to the current research to understand the problem of disproportionality. This literature review will include (a) an explanation of the phenomenological research tradition (b) previously researched experiences/characteristics of women in the superintendency (c) the impact of gender and race and the underrepresentation of women in the role (d) explore the barriers and challenges of Black women superintendents in U.S. school districts (e) highlight some previous studies utilizing phenomenology as a research method.

Gaining knowledge of previously conducted research on women in the superintendent position, with a specific focus on Black women in the superintendency, was critical as they would provide insight into previous findings, as well as research designs. The review included studying the impact of gender, women in the superintendency, Black women superintendents, and job satisfaction/motivation. The problem of disproportionate representation of women in the superintendency is not new. The literature review yielded a variety of studies aimed at addressing the problem. Since gaining a historical perspective of the problem was important, seminal research was sought. Previous researchers have sought to determine a rationale for the problem by researching topics such as pathways to the position, career influences, and barriers. Although the study aimed to examine the lived experiences of Black women superintendents, it was important

to look more deeply at previously conducted research on the experiences of women of all races in the position. Since the current study is a phenomenology aimed at exploring the lived experiences, reviewing a few studies comparing the lived experiences of women versus men in the superintendency was necessary (Bernal et al., 2017; Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Wolverton & McDonald, 2001).

Reviewing these studies helped me to gain a historical perspective about the previous experiences of Black women. Specifically, I wanted to know if the experiences of Black women superintendents have evolved. For example, Arnez (1982) studied Washington D.C. superintendent Barbara Sizemore and reported her dismissal from the position due to conflict with her school board. In my study, I found the superintendents' relationships with school boards to be vital to their success or detrimental to them. Since the research question involved examining the lived experiences of Black women, choosing studies describing the lived experiences of Black women superintendents was important (Angel et al., 2013; Brown, 2014; Wiley et al., 2017). My interest in exploring the disproportionate representation led me to uncover personal themes and external barriers faced by Black women. Naming barriers such as discrimination and biased recruitment techniques, Wiley et al. (2017) and Brown in 2014 provided specific examples of what I might find in my research. Findings from Angel et al. (2013) helped to illuminate and affirm my belief that disproportionate representation in the position is not only caused by barriers but choice. While exploring previously conducted phenomenology, a weakness or gap in the extant studies related to and including various types of superintendents was apparent. There were no studies found including superintendents such as deputy, assistant, or area superintendents. Therefore, I included them as possibilities for participant selection in my study. While research has been conducted in

various states, there was little representation of studies conducted in the southeastern portion of the United States. This confirmed the significance of the study.

As the literature review continued to develop, articles on the general topic of women superintendents were found. Given the aim of the study, more relevant literature on the experiences of Black women of superintendents was needed. Again, research aimed at the southeastern region was missing, revealing another weakness in the extant literature. This helped to further create significance for this study.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology dates to 1906 when it was founded by Edmund Husserl. This popular research tradition emphasizes the lived experiences of people to understand their essence. The research tradition has been further developed, leading to the creation of two types of phenomenology: descriptive and interpretive. Some pioneers and notable researchers of the methodology include Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Clark Moustakas, and Max van Manen. Van Manen (1990) tells us that essence is what makes a thing what it is. According to Moustakas (1994), the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl focuses on the role of describing experiences without inserting interpretation. Moustakas also asserts that emphasis should be placed on the journey of the person to understand their lived experiences. According to previous researchers, phenomenology is a philosophy and an approach to inquiry that seeks truth and logic through critical and intuitive thinking about human existence (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

Key phenomenology theorists

Over the years, the original tradition has been thoroughly explored. The main differences in the theorists' beliefs first revolve around their tradition being interpretive or descriptive. Some

notable phenomenological researchers are worth mentioning in this literature review. Researching these theorists increased my understanding of the methodology, providing relevant information to determine my study's design.

Edmund Husserl

German philosopher Edmund Husserl is credited for the conception of phenomenology in 1906. Husserl is known as the father of transcendental phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) speaks of Husserl's focus on intention and essence as he describes the research tradition. Bracketing is a major component of this original tradition.

Martin Heidegger

In 1927, Martin Heidegger, one of Husserl's students created his version of Husserl's phenomenology called hermeneutic phenomenology. Although trained by Husserl, Heidegger's stance varied slightly from his mentor. He believed researchers couldn't bracket their experiences (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Hermeneutic phenomenology asserts that researchers cannot completely bracket their biases. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, it aims to interpret the participant's lived experiences.

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Gadamer (1976/2004) is known for his iteration of Heidegger's hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenological study. Slightly different, Gadamer focused on human subjectivity and developed a critical and dialogical approach to hermeneutics (Regan, 2012). His version emphasizes the use of language acting as the medium for understanding and a means of sharing the complexities of human experience (Regan, 2012).

Max van Manen

Max van Manen expanded on hermeneutical phenomenology. Van Manen (1990, p. 4) describes hermeneutical phenomenology as the ‘lived experiences’ of research participants (phenomenology) and the interpretation (text) of the life they have lived and experienced (hermeneutics). Van Manen posits that a researcher can’t bracket or keep their own experiences out of the research process.

Clark Moustakas

Moustakas (1994) translated Husserl’s concept into a methodology called transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology, also known as descriptive, is not concerned with the interpretation of the researcher’s personal experience and is focused on describing the ‘lived experiences’ of the participants in the research. Bracketing is a major process in Moustakas’ transcendental phenomenology method.

Women in the superintendency

Given the longevity of the problem of disproportionate representation of women in the role, it made sense to review prior literature documenting the experiences of women in the superintendency. Previous researchers brought attention to the unfair treatment of women as it related to various aspects of American life such as jobs, schooling, and basic American rights such as voting. While the focus of the study was specifically tied to the experiences of Black women in the position, including research on the overall experiences of women in the role was vital.

The topic of women in the superintendency has also been researched for over 20 years researchers have tackled aspects of the topic related to the underrepresentation, barriers, and challenges faced in pursuit and while in the role, as well as the impact of gender on their superin-

tendents (Tallerico & Blount,2004). According to Tallerico & Blount (2004), the field of education shifted from being male-dominated to being female-dominated, but males remained dominant in holding the highest position (the superintendent position). Providing the historical context regarding the shifts in gender, this 20-year-old research proves the longevity of the problem. Limited research has been conducted detailing the lived experiences of women superintendents. Studying their lived experiences can help to explain the underrepresentation that continues to persist.

Impact of gender

Since the problem of underrepresentation of women in the position is evident and long-lasting, researchers have studied the impact of gender to further understand the cause of the disproportionate representation. Gender bias is a contributing factor as it relates to hiring, lived experiences, and even tenure. In Black feminist thought, Collins (1990) describes women's paid work as being organized within intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender.

The impact of gender bias can be felt by women in numerous ways in society and in particular, their career opportunities and career experiences can be impacted. Hiring practices can be a tool to keep women out of a school district's chief position. This aspect has been researched over the years. Headhunting, like gatekeeping, allows gender bias to impact hiring practices (Tallerico, 2000). Even though districts might set criteria for screening applicants, headhunters can allow their views of previously held positions by women candidates as lesser. This impacts women and people of color.

The lived experiences of women in the superintendent position help to explain why women are underrepresented in the role. Brunner (2000) studied the impact of gender with 12

women superintendent participants to determine if their talk regarding their superintendency contained events or episodes of inequality. Brunner sought to answer the following research questions: (1) Why are there so few women in the superintendency? (2) What part does gender inequality play in the phenomenon? (3) Is gender inequality an experience of women in the role? Brunner used Floyd Hunter's reputational model to develop the sample. Drawing from a list of all women superintendents in the nation, colleagues in the educational and private sectors were asked to identify women superintendents whom they considered to have "reputations as extraordinarily successful practitioners." The responses generated a sample size of 12. In the end, the sample consisted of superintendents from the Northeast, Midwest, and Southeast regions of the United States. All 12 included in the study were of Euro-American descent whose ages ranged from mid-40s to late 50s. Data was collected through 54 interviews. Each participant was interviewed twice. Interviews were also conducted with two affiliated individuals for each participant. Brunner named three substantial findings because of the study: (1) The participants' stories consisted of various experiences of inequality (2) Participants leaned on the use of various strategies that debunked gender bias (3) Their settled discourse and practice differed from the traditional settled discourse in educational leadership. An example of an inequality experience described by participants was their need to downplay their authority. As women superintendents, the women felt it necessary to wear their power lightly to ensure no one felt inferior. Brunner's study was framed around Swindler's theory of "settled and unsettled" social periods, which proposes the idea of new strategies of action being created during those unsettled periods where instances such as inequality exist. Brunner used Swindler's theory as a framework for her study because of its focus on talk and her agreement that discourse is a form of social action worthy of study (p. 3). One strategy used by the participants for addressing this inequality was stressing

collaboration, consensus building, and inclusion. Collaboration was deemed a successful strategy to get the work done rather than flexing their authority. Another example of an experience of inequality was overt silencing. When speaking to colleagues (especially males), the participants experienced negative body language such as eye-rolling, sighs, folded arms, etc. while their male counterparts dominated conversations. A helpful strategy for countering this is realizing the authority of the position and being strategic about what they say. Although they knew their thoughts/words might not be received in the same way as men, they knew the importance of sharing their perspectives anyway. Their discourse differed from traditional discourse in numerous ways. Traditional discourse includes power as dominance, whereas the women used power as shared. Traditional discourse includes being aggressive and authoritarian, whereas the women used a soft approach. Traditional discourse includes delegation, whereas the women make sure everyone has an opportunity to be heard. Brunner's study is significant to my study since it specifically discussed strategies for dealing with inequities. Along the same lines was Sampson's 2018 study focused on strategies for longevity of the position. She investigated the lived experiences of five women superintendents in Texas to determine factors leading to longevity in the position. Strong working relationships with their school boards, a commitment and passion for the position, solid connections with their communities, a commitment and passion for the position, and a sense of achievement were cited as factors in their longevity. As minority leaders, Black women superintendents need strategies to survive and thrive in the position. I hope readers of my study will review the literature and find suggestions for success in the position.

Comparative studies have also been conducted to determine the impact of gender on the lived experiences of superintendents. Differences in experiences between men and women superintendents have been documented over time. In 2017, Bernal et al. compared the perceptions of

leadership characteristics required to acquire the position, differences in lived experiences, and commonalities of career pathways of three women superintendents vs. those of three men. The results yielded differences in all three areas. In response to the question about leadership characteristics, female responses indicated themes of communication, relationships, and vision. Male responses to the leadership characteristics did not indicate any themes. Their responses showed a perception of the importance of the presence of a unique approach to leadership; therefore, showing a presence of gender bias and stereotyping as it relates to leadership characteristics required for the job. The second research question of their study addressed the differences in the lived experiences specifically. Women in the study expressed perceptions of issues related to their gender, like those documented in previous research (Bernal et al., 2017) such as a constant feeling of needing to prove themselves, expectations around familial responsibilities, working harder, etc. Men responded and did not express feelings of inequality or gender issues. Finally, the responses related to career trajectory were the only questions with overlapping responses between the women and men. Those themes were: the importance of knowing oneself, a commitment to a vision that is developed with various stakeholders, answering the call to serve, and making a difference for children (p. 51). Examining comparative studies regarding the differential treatment of men and women superintendents allowed me to validate the existence of the problem and further understand the depth of the historical discriminatory treatment of women in the position.

The impact of gender has been felt in lived experiences and tenure. Grogan is an example of previously conducted research on this impact. Grogan (1999) presented a study detailing the experience of the first woman superintendent in a small southern city who faced issues of gender stereotyping. The superintendent faced criticism based on societal norms expected of women.

These perceptions were grounded in stereotypes and influenced the way the community responded to her (p. 654). Grogan concluded that not only was the superintendent's experience different from her male predecessor, but the issues also led to a short tenure of only two years. Since my study was geared toward the southeastern region, this study was particularly interesting to me since it provided a context like that of a few of my participants.

Underrepresentation of women in the position

The topic of the underrepresentation of women in the position of superintendent was found in abundance during this literature review. Collins (1990) wrote about the domain of power and how social institutions are organized to reproduce Black women's subordination over time. Exclusion from the best jobs, healthcare, and housing are stated as examples of how policies and systems are designed to exclude Black women. Like Black women, women of all races have been excluded from the position of superintendent over the years. The underrepresentation of the women in the position can be explained in many ways. Barriers and challenges faced in the position are known. Are they the reasons for the underrepresentation? Do qualified participants simply not want the position? Is the underrepresentation due to a lack of leadership experience? Wolverton and McDonald (2001) sought to provide insight into this problem by investigating the pathway to the superintendency and comparing the pathways of women versus men. Interestingly, they found that 18% of their female participants, while qualified, did not intend to seek the superintendency. Several factors such as stress, the low wage differential between their current position and the superintendency, media relations, and working with school boards arose as reasons for not desiring to pursue the position. In 2001, Wolverton and McDonald, like previous researchers, found the high school principalship to be the most common trajectory to the superintendency. In their study, they found the high school principalship to be held mostly by

males. This potentially reveals a rationale for fewer women assuming or pursuing the role of superintendent. In her mixed methods study conducted in Minnesota, Wyland (2016) reported on the positive career influences and barriers that female superintendents in Minnesota encountered as they assumed the position. Gender discrimination and family responsibilities arose as top barriers to women aspirants. Most notably, gender discrimination was noted as the most prevalent barrier for women serving in the position.

Black women superintendents

It is imperative to include research related to Black women's experiences in the position. The lived experiences of Black women in the position add credibility. Although the research topic has risen in popularity over the past 15 or more years, in comparison to other topics, Black women in the superintendency are still understudied (Wiley, et al. 2017). In addition to the challenges endured as women in the superintendency, Black women must contend with intersectionality (Collins, 1990). The research design, context, research purposes, and research questions of previous studies showed great variation. Previous research on this topic provides insight and helps to explain the problem of the underrepresentation of Black women in the superintendency. While many of the previous studies did not specifically name intersectionality, the context of their studies revealed a focus on the dual challenge of being women and Black in the position.

Like the previously mentioned studies conducted on women superintendents, some research called attention to discrimination by comparing the experiences of Black women superintendents to those of others. Donohoo and Hunter (2005) shared examples of how Black women superintendents face differences in financial resources. Richmond Public Schools was cited as reducing the budget when a Black woman became superintendent. This example was provided to illustrate one of how Black women superintendents receive differential treatment.

Several of the first studies of Black women superintendents centered around describing their characteristics and strategies used to survive the position. One of the earliest documented studies about Black women in the superintendency (Arnez, 1982) sought to describe the women and provided mostly an overall view of their accomplishments and characteristics, rather than an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences. In an analysis of Black women superintendents in 2005, Alston documented a strong belief in God and servant leadership, a deep care for children, a strong self-efficacy, and a focus on creating a legacy of service as common characteristics of Black women superintendents. While the studies helped to provide insight into the women, they did not document their detailed lived experiences.

Only a few of the beginning studies closely examined the lived experiences of those in the position. Nancy Arnez (1982) conducted mini-case studies with two of the first Black women superintendents: Barbara A. Sizemore and Ruth B. Love. She described the problems encountered, achievement of goals, and accomplishments in education. Similarly, Revere (1985) surveyed 22 of the 29 Black women superintendents in the position in 1984-85. Revere sought to describe the career and success patterns of Black women as chief administrators of public school districts.

More recently studies documenting lived experiences have become more popular. Several phenomenological studies have been conducted recently in various states of the United States on Black women's lived experiences in the position. When researching the topic of disproportionate representation of Black women, getting an in-depth look at their lived experiences provides invaluable insight. Angel et al. (2013) sought to examine the perceptions of currently practicing Black women district-level administrators about the barriers and challenges of securing the superintendency. They utilized North Carolina's personnel administrators' database to identify

seven of their ten Black district-level administrators. Two additional participants were referred from other study participants. The final participant was a former colleague of one of the participants. Using Seidman's model of phenomenological interviewing, the researchers conducted 90-minute face-to-face interviews to retrieve the data. The researchers grouped their findings into two themes: personal indicators and externally imposed barriers. Personal indicators found included an internalized ethical system, early influence of early support systems, grand expectations from the community, and a necessity for an elevated level of preparedness. Participants spoke of internal ethics such as honesty, equity, justice, and being fair to all as guiding principles in their practice. Early influence and lofty expectations from the community consisted of encouragement and support from relationships such as parents, neighbors, church members, teachers, etc. They identified the necessity to hold a doctoral degree as a required credential for the position. Barriers identified by the participants included experiences of oppression, uncertainty about the selection process, and disconnection from network support. Some oppressive experiences described included a glass ceiling, preconceived notions of what a woman's role should be, and blatant stereotyping. They described the selection process as unclear and inconsistent with hiring committees having hidden agendas or personal vendettas. Finally, they discussed the disconnection from network support. They acknowledged no formal system of support such as mentoring for Black women school administrators in their state.

Brown (2014) focused on women who were current or former superintendents. Like Angel et al. Brown conducted a phenomenological study in the Southeast region of the United States to determine how race, gender, and social politics affected the recruitment and retention of Black women to the public school superintendency. Of the eight participants, five were current

superintendents, while three were retired. While the article did not explicitly discuss data collection, it is assumed that interviews were utilized since the study was a phenomenology. As with most qualitative studies, the data was collected and coded to identify themes. The data was shared in the form of “lessons.” Lessons learned about race, recruitment, and retention were presented as the first finding. Black women must carry themselves to a higher standard, working harder than their colleagues to prove their leadership capacities. Additionally, race is a factor in social politics. Although often equally credentialed, Black women benefit most from having a White male as a mentor or advocate. Finally, Black women must be aware of the power of race. Understanding the power of race can help Black women be strategic while seeking and serving in the role. One participant spoke of the mindset needed, sharing sentiments such as understanding the role of race creates a situation where you are not surprised by the lack of support or the fact that you will be constantly critiqued. The second theme identified was lessons about Black female gender, recruitment, and retention. It was revealed that there is a continued lack of access to powerful social and political organizations. For example, White males often have organizations or community affiliations for support. For Black women, these supports are few or non-existent. In addition to the lack of social support, a predictable pattern of ascension is apparent. White males, Black males, White females, and Black females continue to be the order when it comes to obtaining the superintendent position. Although progress has been made, there are still stereotypical beliefs and myths about Black women. Since the likelihood of securing a position for Black women is so low, self-recruitment is crucial. The participants mentioned the necessity of being willing to put yourself out there. Black women must be willing to apply for multiple positions and not fear being declined. Strategic networking and making connections are key strategies for securing the position. Being willing to relocate is necessary to secure the position.

Wiley et al. (2017) used a phenomenological approach to identify the challenges, supports, and personal background characteristics that participants believe influenced their ascension to the superintendency in Texas. Using a qualitative case study design, researchers sought to answer one overarching research question: How do African American women superintendents describe their lived experiences in acquiring superintendent positions in the state of Texas? Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six of the eight women currently serving as superintendents in the state. The researchers used email and phone calls to initially contact the potential participants. An interview protocol was designed to answer the research questions and obtain demographic and general background information. Audio taping and transcribing, along with coding were used to analyze the data. Moustakas' approach to transcendental phenomenological research was used for data analysis. Wiley et al. synthesized the data and found three major themes: (1) The participants' desire to impact others at various levels (2) the participants' sources of personal strength (3) external support systems. These themes provided answers to the research question and provided knowledge regarding their challenges, support, and inspiration for pursuing the position.

It was important for me to review various recent studies on the topic for several reasons. First, I wanted to investigate barriers and strategies. Secondly, to investigate the experiences of Black women superintendents in various states and contexts. Thirdly, it was essential to design a different study that would further the research depth on the topic. Finally, to further inform and validate the significance of my study, I wanted to include recent research with various research purposes to illuminate the fact that regardless of context and research focus, there are commonalities in barriers and strategies used. Some of the additional studies I reviewed included: Harris (2020), Walker (2014), and Davis (2022). For example, Harris (2020) focused her research on the

experiences of Black women leaders during their path to the position, as well as while serving in the position. She described themes such as the importance of networking, no room for mistakes, the requirement to be exceptional, and the importance of taking calculated risks. Similarly, Walker (2014) studied superintendents in Ohio as she illuminated the presence of barriers and strategies. She found gender and race stereotyping, career path and accessibility, and a lack of mentorship and support as barriers. She also found strategies such as self-confidence, networking, and spirituality for success. Although the participants in Davis' 2022 study hailed from various areas in the United States, her results found themes of (1) spirituality, (2) dual bias status, (3) supportive relationships, (4) preparation, and (5) self-care. All these studies served as validation of the widespread presence of discrimination Black women superintendents face. While progress has been made in acquiring the position of superintendent, the unfair and unequal experiences prove there is still much work to do. Black women have fought to be included, however, once in, they realize the stark differences in their experiences. As you can see, much of the previously conducted research yielded comparable results. However, the goal of my research study was not to simply validate previous findings. I aimed to add to the findings by uncovering new and different realities such as barriers and strategies for success.

Black feminist thought and critical race theory

While exploring Black women's lived experiences, many studies used Black feminist thought and critical race theory as frameworks. In Black feminist thought, Collins (1990) outlines some basic tenets:

- (1) Lived experiences as a criterion of meaning;
- (2) The use of dialogue in assessing claims;
- (3) An emphasis on the ethic of caring;

(4) An emphasis on the ethic of personal accountability;

(5) An emphasis on positionality as an agent of knowledge; and

(6) The recognition of ‘truth’ and the complexity of the pathway toward truth. Delgado & Stefancic (2001) described some basic tenets of critical race theory: racism is ordinary, race is a social construct, the idea of interest convergence, the idea of storytelling and counter stories, and civil rights legislation benefits white people.

Among the studies found, some questions they answered were: What role does intersectionality play in the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the Southeast? Black feminist thought also framed the 2022 phenomenological narrative study of Mason as she sought to answer the following research questions: What were the barriers or challenges to the attainment of the district superintendency as perceived by Black women superintendents? Are there issues or opportunities, as perceived by the participants, unique to the intersectionality of race and gender that impacted their effectiveness as district superintendents? And, what, if any, “commonalities of perceptions” do the participants exhibit based on their experiences? Mason’s findings indicate alignment with various aspects of Black feminist thought as described by Collins including the concept of “self-definition” or “the power to name one’s reality” (Collins, 1990). Additionally, Collins emphasized the standpoint of Black women’s experiences, also a point of focus of the study as Mason focused on the standpoint of the Black women superintendents, as they told their own stories from their perspective. Specifically, Mason’s study revealed common barriers and challenges among her four superintendent participants as they described their lived experiences. Themes such as a lack of respect for their personhood, barriers imposed by the media, being held to a higher standard than their male counterparts, and lack of respect for their knowledge and expertise. Tonya Bailey-Walker (2018) used Black feminist thought and critical

race theory as frameworks as she investigated the lived experiences of Black female superintendents in the state of Ohio. She emphasized their career paths, barriers, perspectives, and successes. Her findings were supported by Black feminist thought as themes arose. Barriers and challenges such as gender bias, proving competency, higher standards, and cultural differences were found.

Gaps in the literature

In this study, interviewing six participants determined whether there were commonalities and allowed comparison of their experiences. Hays and Singh (2012) recommended a sample of three to ten participants in phenomenological research. Suggs Mason (2021) argued the fact that there are gaps in the research comparing the experiences of Black women superintendents in different settings such as urban, suburban, and rural. Therefore, securing the participation of superintendents serving in each of those settings was a goal.

While there is extant literature on the topic, Brunner (2000) shared the fact that there are limited perspectives shared in over 75 years of research. The research is mostly told from the White male perspective. This is due to the disproportionate number of Black women in the superintendency. Therefore, my research aimed to add to the existing literature by investigating the lived experiences of current or former Black women superintendents. Their lived experiences will explain why the problem of disproportionality exists. In making their experiences known, steps can be taken to provide support and encouragement for more Black women leaders to pursue the position. This would allow us to see continued growth in the number of Black women in the position and hopefully, eventually close the gap of disproportionate representation.

The literature reviewed and presented in this chapter demonstrates the challenges and barriers faced by Black women superintendents such as the impact of gender, overcoming stereotypes and systemic racism, strategies used for success, and practices aimed at keeping Black women out of the position. The literature reviewed also revealed a need for continued research documenting the lived experiences of Black women superintendents to further explain the problem of disproportionate representation in the position. The review also included a discussion about the phenomenological research approach. Finally, the review included studies framed in two popular theoretical frameworks: Black feminist thought and critical race theory. The methods and procedures will be explained in Chapter three.

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research design intended to answer the research questions. The lived experiences of Black women superintendents were investigated to determine their barriers, challenges, and successes, as well as the impact of race and gender in the lived experiences. Also, this chapter will describe participant criteria and selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to understand the essence of what it is like to serve as a superintendent in the southeast as a Black woman. It was assumed that the intersection of being Black, and a woman impacts the experiences of the women in this position. This intersectionality, along with the barriers and challenges faced due to the double bind, can provide insight into why there are so few Black women in the position.

Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher is an instrument and a vital component of the study. Not only do the thoughts and feelings of the researcher come into play, but the reactions and interpretation of findings play a role (Hays and Singh, 2012). As a Black woman and educational leader, I have insight into the role of intersectionality while serving in a position of authority. I have served as an elementary school principal and assistant principal. In both positions, I have felt the impact of race and gender as I have led mostly White faculties and worked with stakeholders who undoubtedly questioned my intelligence and competency. So, this topic matters due to my identity as a Black woman in educational leadership and I was able to deeply connect with participants. There were many times during interviews in which I could relate to the stories being told. In my journal, when a participant recounted being asked ridiculous questions by a board member to discern her understanding of literacy, I wrote, “Reminds me of being drilled about

guided reading by a first-grade teacher when I was a principal.” I could relate to the superintendent’s frustration and feeling of her intelligence being insulted. This is just one example of how I related to the women’s experiences. This commonality fostered a sense of authenticity and transparency for participants. Additionally, gaining inspiration and tools for success can be used later in my career journey are personal benefits for conducting the study.

Phenomenological researchers acknowledge or bracket their values and assumptions to gain more insight into the phenomenon (Hays and Singh, 2012). Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) explained phenomenological reduction using Epoche, bracketing, and horizontalization. The idea of the Epoche is derived from Husserl’s work in the 1970s. Moustakas described the process of Epoche as the first step in phenomenological reduction. This process requires the researcher to set aside preconceived notions, prejudgments, and biases to engage in the research process. One component of the Epoche process is exercising reflection. Journaling was used to practice reflection and check biases. Throughout the process, I wrote during and after the interviews. Capturing my biases, assumptions, and reactions to the participants’ responses, and making note of how my beliefs evolved was a priority. Hays and Singh (2012) discussed the need for qualitative researchers to be reflexive. According to the authors, reflexivity is one of the distinguishing factors between qualitative and quantitative research. Reflexivity requires attention to authenticity, empathy, and unconditional positive regard. Tools such as reflexive journaling or the use of a heuristic device can help one become a reflexive researcher.

Bracketing requires the researcher to place the research topic into brackets, leaving everything else outside. This allows the focus of the research to remain on the topic and not be cluttered with everything else. Although it might be impossible to keep some prior experiences, be-

liefs, etc. outside the brackets, phenomenological researchers make every attempt to do so. Finally, Moustakas (1994) discussed the use of horizons in phenomenological reduction. Horizontalization is placing the same value on every statement the participant shares. As the interview continues, irrelevant statements are disregarded, leaving only the horizons. The horizons are then grouped into themes to paint a clear picture of the phenomenon.

The relationship between myself and the participants was collaborative. Through multiple dialogues, the aim was to uncover factors that lead to the underrepresentation of Black women in the position of superintendent. According to Moustakas, as the researcher collaborates with the participants, he/she is also engaged in thoughtful reflection throughout the process. This reflection allows the researcher to analyze, synthesize, and arrive at essential descriptions capturing the essence of the lived experiences of participants.

Researchers are encouraged to consider their position as insider or outsider researchers as they engage in reflexivity. My position was defined as an inside researcher for this project since I collected the data. Additionally, due to my existing knowledge of the inner workings of the superintendent position and school districts, I was an insider. As a Black woman educational leader, I was challenged with keeping my preconceived notions about challenges and barriers women face in check. I sought to understand the challenges and barriers, although I had preconceived notions of the challenges. Journaling helped me to keep an open mind and remain open. My use of the interview protocol allowed me to remain focused on the intent and purpose of the research so that the experience would not be clouded by judgments.

Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology aims to thoroughly research a phenomenon to unpack and interpret the experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenology empowers subjects to fight against

dominant narratives that distort the “unexplained assumptions of our personal, cultural, political, and social beliefs” (van Manen, 2016, p. 13). Van Manen describes hermeneutical phenomenology as comparing the individual experiences of those who have experienced the same phenomenon. This hermeneutical phenomenology research approach was used to examine the lived experiences of Black women superintendents since this study aimed to examine and describe the essence of the women’s experiences as superintendents, as well as interpret their experiences. It sheds light on the experiences of Black women superintendents and is designed to tell their unheard experiences, providing insight into the problem of underrepresentation in the superintendent position.

Data Collection

Hays & Singh (2012) recommended first considering the important attributes of the study when choosing a sampling method. Some attributes they urge researchers to consider are units of analysis, demographic factors, and desired diversity. For this study, purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling involves identifying specific criteria to help obtain information-rich cases of the phenomenon before entering the field to do the research (Hays & Singh, 2012). There are six categories of purposive sampling methods. Since there is a goal to look for commonalities and the study revolves around a specific, identified group (Black women), homogeneous sampling will be used (Hays & Singh, 2012). However, including participants from geographically different locales such as urban, rural, and suburban allowed maximum variation within the sample to be achieved. The identified criteria used included Black women currently or formerly serving as a public school superintendent, assistant superintendent, or deputy superintendent, with at least three years of experience in the position, and working or having worked in the southeastern region of the United States. Although the identified criteria created limitations

and could have made it more difficult to secure participants, these criteria were chosen because participants meeting these criteria helped to best answer the research question. A sample size of no less than three, but no more than ten is recommended for phenomenological studies (Hays & Singh, 2012). The criteria of a three-year tenure allowed for deeper experiences and a longer time to reflect on their experiences. I was unable to locate any research specifically geared at documenting the lived experiences of deputy superintendents. Therefore, including them as participants in the study increased my sample population and would also document the experiences of deputy superintendents. Finally, most of the reviewed literature took place in other regions of the country. Focusing on the southeastern region of the United States made it more relevant to me and added more perspective to the existing body of research. Like other methods of sampling, research bias is possible with purposive sampling. According to Regoli (2019), purposive sampling allows the researcher to create the sample, which relies on the researcher's judgment. Regoli (2019) also asserted that participants selected for a research study using purposive sampling can manipulate the data since they know they have been selected for research. Although I planned to use snowball sampling if I was unable to secure participation from six participants using the desired criteria, it was not needed.

A combination of strategies was planned for identifying participants such as social media outlets for advertising the study and soliciting interest. However, all participants were secured by using public information from school district websites to learn of potential participants and emailing qualified superintendents directly. A recruitment email is included in Appendix A. According to Hays and Singh (2012), a sample of 3-10 is recommended for phenomenological studies. The goal was to secure participation from six participants from geographically various locations (urban, rural, and suburban) with at least three years in the role. Once participants were identified,

written communication (email and letter) was used to share the study's purpose and obtain informed consent from the six participants.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Position	# of supt. placements	# of years as supt.	District locale	District demographics
Dr. Lennette	49	Deputy supt.	1	4	suburban	45,000 students in 76 schools
Dr. Juliet	51	Supt.	2	10	rural	3,000 students in 7 schools
Dr. Evelyn	62	Supt.	1	6	suburban	7,100 students in 13 schools
Supt. Lillie	55	Supt.	1	5	rural	1,800 students in 3 schools
Dr. Annie Bell	63	Supt.	1	10	rural	5,000 students in 7 schools
Dr. Tami	51	Supt.	2	6	urban	51,000 students in 81 schools

A variety of information was collected to answer the research question: What are the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the Southeast? Interviews, document analysis, and artifacts are used most frequently in qualitative research. However, data collection tools are determined best based on the research questions. Due to the nature of the research question and like most qualitative research, most information was collected through semi-structured interviews (Hays & Singh, 2012). Personal artifacts were shared to further capture the essence of their lived experiences. According to Hays & Singh (2012), these are credible sources for data collection in

qualitative research. In this study, multiple sources of data were used. Therefore, including artifacts such as pictures, quotes, and other personal items from participants made the data richer. A reflexive journal also aided in the collection of data. According to van Manen (2014), the researcher is the primary research instrument. Therefore, my thoughts and feelings played a pivotal role in interpreting the women's experiences. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, artifacts, and a reflexive journal ensured crystallization. In phenomenological research, the term crystallization is used rather than triangulation to increase trustworthiness. According to Richardson (1994), crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex understanding of the topic.

Semi-structured interviews

Hays & Singh (2012) described the critical role of semi-structured interviews for data collection in qualitative research. For this study, Seidman's (2019) phenomenological interviewing method was used. Seidman's interview technique of using primarily open-ended questions was chosen because the format allowed me to build upon and explore the participants' responses to those questions. This format's goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study (Seidman, 2019). Seidman's phenomenological interviewing considers three aspects: the structure of interviews, the spacing of interviews, and the length of interviews. Seidman recommends three separate interviews rather than one single interview for phenomenological research. The three-part interview structure allows the researcher and participant to build a relationship. Seidman provides guidelines for the three-part interview structure. The participants' life history was the focus of the first interview. The questions were related to the participants' early lives spanning to the present, involving personal and professional experiences. The second interview moved to their current lived experiences. Those questions were geared towards their experiences as superintendents. The third interview asked participants to reflect and

make meaning of their experiences. When it comes to spacing, Seidman (2019) recommends the three-interview structure be spaced at least three days apart and no more than a week. This allows time for the participant to easily recall the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two. Although Seidman suggested 90 minutes for each interview, I chose to limit each interview to one hour given the responsibilities of the participants. About time, what Seidman says is most important is having an agreed-upon time limit that is shared in advance with participants. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study. According to Hays & Singh (2012), this method of interviewing is useful in eliciting a description of the essence of an experience that participants have undergone. Each participant participated in three one-hour virtual interviews using the Cisco WebEx platform to gain insight into their lived experiences. The three interviews consisted of questions aimed at answering the research question. The interview protocol was constructed to best describe and understand the essence of the participants' lived experiences. The interview protocol is attached as Appendix C.

Seidman's interviewing technique was important for my study for several reasons. The three-part format allowed us to build trust and relationships. The structure allowed participants to become more comfortable and vulnerable as we progressed through the three interviews since the first one felt lighter as it began with recalling childhood and talking about family. For some, their level of vulnerability was obvious right away. For others, they circled back to questions asked in the first interview to further elaborate. As participants were engaging in the interview process, as the researcher, I was engaged in the hermeneutical process of gathering data and interpreting the data. The timing between the interviews was especially helpful for me as I was the

primary research instrument. It allowed me to sit with my findings, make meaning of their responses, and prepare any follow-up questions for the subsequent interview. Finally, utilizing the interview protocol with fidelity helped me to stick to the agreed-upon time limits to ensure I was respectful of the participants' time while gathering the necessary information.

Artifacts

To gain more insight into the lived experiences, as well as the motivation of participants, personal artifacts were examined. While artifacts were not predetermined, they could have included sources such as Bible verses, inspirational quotes, photographs, etc. A variety of sources were anticipated since individuals draw from various sources for strength, sustaining strategies participants use while serving in the position, as well as sources of motivation. According to Hays & Singh (2012), personal documents can help to further understand the culture and context of participants' experiences of a phenomenon (p. 287). Since the interviews were conducted virtually, artifacts were either shown on screen or simply described. The participants' willingness to share these artifacts was based on the comfort and convenience of the participants.

Reflexive journaling

Husserl (1906) recommended that researchers bracket, or set aside, biases, presumptions, and the like as they conduct phenomenological research. This allows the researcher to maintain a learning stance. Therefore, I utilized reflexive journaling. The journal allowed me to capture my reflections, bracket my biases, and make meaning of the various perspectives of participants. Van Manen (2014) spoke of the importance of writing during research by saying, "In writing, we may deepen and change ourselves in ways we cannot predict" (p. 20). The journal served as an additional piece of data to further understand the participants' experiences.

While bracketing is suggested to fully understand the phenomenon, the researcher's own experiences provide valuable insight into the interpretation of the findings. As the main research instrument and since hermeneutic phenomenology calls for the researcher to interpret the experiences, the journal was not used to bracket out all biases. Instead, I used it to track shifts in my thinking since I had prior knowledge of the phenomenon and noted my interpretations of the participants' responses.

Procedures

Following approval from Georgia State's Institutional Review Board (IRB), sampling, informed consent, and data collection began. Semi-structured interviews, artifact examination, and reflexive journaling served as the instruments for data collection. As previously stated, the data collection methods were chosen with the research design in mind. In particular, the collection methods were chosen based on their ability to answer my research question. Before beginning the interviewing process, I began the reflexive journaling. Writing at the outset of the research allowed me to capture and bracket any feelings or biases I had before going into the interviews. Returning to this initial entry, as well as capturing my thoughts throughout the process, was vital to the research process. A three-part phenomenological interviewing method with each participant was used to measure the constructs. Interviewing is a popular technique in qualitative research and phenomenological studies. Seidman (2019) shared the purpose of interviewing as an interest in understanding the lived experience of others and the meanings they make of their experience. Each interview lasted for 60 minutes. The three-part interview consisted of gathering information about the participants' life history in the first phase. Again, those questions ascertained their overall experience throughout childhood and early career life. The second phase in-

volved asking questions about the phenomenon of superintendency. These questions were tailored around the barriers, challenges, and successes of their lived experiences. During the second interview, I elicited the sharing of personal artifacts to ascertain a deeper understanding of each person's essence, as well as identify sources for motivation and strength. Like the interviews, the artifacts were analyzed as I completed my analysis of the interview transcripts due to the related questions included. The third phase involved reflecting on the meaning of the experiences. These questions asked the participants to make meaning of their experiences as a superintendent. An interview protocol (Appendix C) ensured all participants were asked the same questions. Phenomenology stresses direct experiences with those who are experiencing the phenomenon. Therefore, the interview questions were designed with the research question in mind to ensure relevant data was collected. Each virtual interview was recorded on my personal, password-protected laptop to capture the participants' words during each 60-minute interview. The interviews were transcribed and coded to look for themes.

Analysis

The goal of conducting phenomenological studies is to understand the phenomenon's essence deeply. Moustakas (1994) described two approaches for analyzing data in phenomenological research. The process involves using horizontalization to create descriptions of the phenomenon. For this study, Moustakas' modification of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Phenomenological Data Analysis was used for analyzing interview data. Manual transcription allowed me to understand the essence of each participant's experiences. I completed all the interviews before beginning the data analysis. Seidman (2019) asserts that waiting to begin analysis helps to avoid imposing meaning from one participant's interviews to the next (p. 113). Following this recommendation, I was able to "sit" with the data and crystallize it. For me, this involved reading the transcripts

multiple times to honor multiple perspectives to paint a clearer picture of the phenomenon. In hermeneutic phenomenology, crystallization allows researchers to understand and interpret the experiences.

When all interviews were completed, I also listened to each recorded video interview twice to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts. This also allowed me to recall the information shared by each participant. I was able to notice patterns among the participant's experiences and realize patterns among them. At this point, a copy of the transcripts was shared via email with participants for member checking to double-check for accuracy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the process of member checking as crucial in establishing credibility. Once confirmed by the participants, crystallization began. Crystallization involves suspending the examination of the data to reflect on the analysis to identify themes (Richardson, 1994). I was able to notice patterns among the participant's experiences and realize patterns among them.

Also, to confirm the themes, I examined each transcript by inspecting each statement looking for significance in describing the participants' experience and making note of those statements. Next, each non-repetitive or non-overlapping statement was listed on a spreadsheet. These statements are described as horizons (Hays & Singh, 2012). I examined the lists of statements and grouped them by like terms, clustering them into themes. These themes were synthesized into a description of the textures of the experience. Here, verbatim examples or quotes from the participants were captured. From this textual description, multiple potential meanings were sought. Next, a textual-structural description of the meanings and essences was created. This process was completed with the transcripts from each participant. Finally, each of the individual textual-structural descriptions was analyzed to construct a composite description of the phenomenon.

Ethical considerations

Lincoln & Guba (1985) defined criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative data: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. They also identified strategies for maximizing the criteria for trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is important when performing research. Trustworthiness adds strength to research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hays & Singh (2012) stressed the importance of the use of multiple strategies to maximize trustworthiness in research. Although there is no way to guarantee validity, researchers should attempt multiple strategies to maximize trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2012). Next, the criteria and strategies used will be explained.

Credibility refers to the degree to which the study is believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility will be established in several ways. First, since information was collected through three interviews, with each lasting between 60-90 minutes (about one and a half hours), a relationship of trust with participants was established, leading participants to be more transparent about their experiences. Secondly, crystallization occurs through analyzing multiple data sources. For this study, data were gathered through interviews, artifact submission, and my reflexive journal to ensure accuracy. Since the study included multiple participants, I believed they would share their lived experiences and thus report them as findings for this study. Credibility was established in several ways. Member checking is one way to attend to credibility. In this study, transcriptions were shared with participants to ensure accuracy. Additionally, credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the participants. Spending an extensive amount of time conducting three 60-minute interviews with each participant allowed the development of trust and transparency.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described transferability as the degree to which the research process could be replicated if desired. Transferability means providing enough information so that the information presented can be applied to the readers' setting (Hays & Singh, 2012). To increase trustworthiness within my study, detailed methods and procedures used in the study are provided to contribute to the transferability. Phenomenological research has detailed steps allowing the process to be repeated. Details are described in the methodology section including the sampling method, data collection process, interviewing procedure, and the data analysis steps. Additionally, resources such as the recruitment email and interview protocol are included in the appendices so that future researchers can replicate the study.

Like transferability, one goal for dependability is to ensure the study can be replicated, and similar findings will be achieved. Dependability also refers to ensuring all members of the team agree with the study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal of dependability is to ensure the data found in the study is consistent with other similar studies. One strategy used was member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking ensures information is reliable. Participants received a copy of the interview transcript to ensure their lived experiences were accurately captured. Again, due to the detailed descriptions described in the methodology section of the study, future researchers should be able to replicate this study and find comparable results.

Finally, confirmability involves reporting the data as collected (Hays and Singh, 2012). Confirmability is defined as the degree to which the findings are genuine reflections of the participants and that my opinions or biases are left out of the study. One strategy for increasing confirmability is the use of reflexive journaling. Reflexive journaling is used to document the researcher's experience throughout the process (Hays & Singh, 2012). The journal was used for bracketing by capturing vital information such as my reactions to participants, findings, research

processes, etc. Journaling helped me to keep biases checked and added to the confirmability of the data. Member checking also contributed to the confirmability of the information as participants checked the transcripts to ensure an accurate depiction of their experiences.

Hays and Singh (2012) described aspects researchers should attend to concerning ethical considerations. They described three key roles of ethical codes in educational research. The codes serve to establish guidelines while educating researchers about the best behavioral practices. They serve as accountability measures when an individual has veered from expected standards. Finally, they guide improvements in practice. Three of the codes are described below, as they are most applicable to the proposed research.

Hays and Singh (2012) described six meta-ethical principles: nonmaleficence, autonomy, beneficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity. Most notable to mention for this study are nonmaleficence, autonomy, and beneficence. To ensure the avoidance of harm, the reactions of participants were observed during each interview. Since qualitative research is highly personal, it was important to attend to this. Autonomy refers to participants being provided with all relevant information about the research project and understanding the implications of participating. This information was included during the informed consent process. Finally, beneficence means maximizing the benefits of participation for participants. Participants saw their participation in the study as a contribution to the field.

Before any contact was made with potential participants, a proposal was submitted to Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon IRB approval, I began to interact with participants and engaged in research according to the IRB's guidelines. Since participants in the study acted as individuals and not as representatives of their school district, no

school district approval was needed. An informed consent form (Appendix B) was used to ensure additional protection for participants and obtained in compliance with the IRB process.

Confidentiality refers to the participant's right to privacy (Hays & Singh, 2012). Confidentiality was prioritized to ensure participants could be honest and transparent while sharing their stories. Confidentiality in this study was maintained by utilizing pseudonyms instead of participants' real names. Participants' demographics, direct quotes, and firsthand experiences are shared. However, their identity was kept confidential.

Rationale for the research design

When determining the research design for the study, qualitative and quantitative research methods were considered. Quantitative designs use numerical data to test a theory. In contrast, the qualitative approach to research is used to describe participants' real-world experiences. Qualitative approaches are best used to study a phenomenon within context. Critical to qualitative work is studying the phenomenon in a natural setting while attending to important aspects such as culture and relationship building to deeply understand participants' experiences (Hays and Singh, 2012). According to Merriam, if the researcher wants to understand a phenomenon, a qualitative research design would be most appropriate (Merriam, 2002). While a mixed methods approach would have worked, a qualitative design was selected because it mostly aligned with the research question. Qualitative research answers "how and what" questions. According to Hays & Singh (2012), qualitative research allows for the study of phenomena in their natural setting and aims to inform practice by providing rich descriptions. In qualitative research, context is important. My interest revolved around deeply understanding the experiences of Black women in the position of superintendent. Sharing participants' experiences through detailed descriptions offered insight regarding how they experienced the position, how gender and race impacted their

experiences, and what motivating factors were present for them to pursue and remain in the position. Given these priorities/goals, qualitative research was appropriate.

When considering various qualitative research designs, case studies and phenomenology were considered based on my research questions. Even though most previously researched topics utilized phenomenological designs, few case studies on the topic were found. A case study is deemed appropriate when researchers desire to answer “how and why” questions, have limited control over events, and can study the phenomenon in its natural context (Hays & Singh, 2012). A case study could have been appropriate for studying Black women superintendents.

However, there are several reasons phenomenology was selected to answer the research question. Phenomenology is chosen when researchers want to describe an experience through the eyes of the participants. Phenomenology places a focus on direct experiences with participants to discover and describe the essence of their lived experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). This involves taking an in-depth look into the lived experiences of a participant and then searching for commonalities among individuals who experienced the same phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). Most phenomenological designs derive from two categories of phenomenological research: descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. Since the study’s purpose was to gain insight into the participants’ lived experiences, as well as understand the problem of disproportionate representation of Black women in the superintendent position, interpretive phenomenology was appropriate. It provided the best structure to understand and interpret the phenomenon of the lived experiences of Black women in the position of superintendent by describing their lived experiences. As a form of interpretive phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology involves reading individual textual descriptions, identifying significance, and making meaning of those individual experi-

ences through comparisons to deeply understand the phenomenon (Regan, 2012). Writing an individual description and then a composite description was my process of using a hermeneutic circle.

Moustakas (1994) provided more insight into the rationale for selecting phenomenology as the potential research design. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology is used when the researcher has arrived at a topic of both social and personal significance. Hays and Singh (2012) described phenomenology as appropriate to gain firsthand knowledge from the participants. It requires us to move beyond published research to have a direct experience with those who have experienced a phenomenon. Investigating the lived experiences of these women provided me the opportunity to not only gain first-hand knowledge but also to hear directly from those who are experiencing the phenomenon. The topic of Black women in the superintendency is socially significant as the lack of representation means the voices and unique perspectives of Black women are missing when it comes to executive-level decision-making in school systems. Moustakas also asserted that phenomenology seeks to describe experiences, rather than offer analysis. Gaining knowledge to describe the everyday experiences, challenges, and successes of the Black woman superintendent are potential benefit. I expected to discover common themes, but I also expected there to be unique experiences based on their system's context. Finally, these experiences best helped to answer the research question and understand the problem of the underrepresentation of Black women in the position of superintendent.

4 RESULTS

Phenomenological research requires the researcher to obtain data directly from those experiencing a phenomenon. In this chapter, I will review and summarize the main findings from my semi-structured interviews with six Black women superintendents. I conducted the interviews from my office to maximize privacy as the women shared intimate details of their experiences. The participants chose to interview from their homes or their offices depending on their level of comfort and preference. The purpose of the current phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Black women superintendents. The research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the Southeast?

Participant Pseudonyms

To protect the identities and privacy of the six participants, a pseudonym of an influential Black woman from my ancestral lineage was assigned to each participant. The pseudonyms represent notable women in my family who influenced my life and upbringing by pouring into me throughout childhood and into my adult life. All but one of these women are deceased, and I believe, are currently watching over me as I journey through life. Lennette was my paternal grandmother, with whom I have so many memories. Evelyn was my mother's biological mom whom I have learned about mostly through my mother. Tami was my godmother with whom I had a close relationship from childhood into adulthood. Annie Bell was one of my great-grandmothers who was an influential Kindergarten teacher during segregated times in my hometown. I followed in her path as an educator. Lillie was my other great-grandmother who took care of me at birth and in the early years since my mom was a young mother. Finally, Juliet is my only living "grandparent." She is my mother's godmother who still plays an active role in my life.

Participant selection

Upon receiving IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval, I compiled a list of current superintendents in six southeastern states Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, South Carolina, and North Carolina. This list consisted of superintendents and deputy superintendents. Research was conducted to ensure each of them met the identified criteria. From the original list, 34 potential participants were contacted via email at email addresses obtained from public websites such as state superintendent association websites and school district websites. Nine superintendents responded and agreed to participate in the study. To achieve maximum variation, six participants from a variety of states and district locales were selected.

Participant #1: Dr. Lennette

Dr. Lennette has been serving as the deputy superintendent in a suburban district in the southeast for four years and plans to pursue the superintendent position soon. She has been married for 27.5 years and has four children.

Dr. Lennette described two living environments during her childhood. A product of biological parents who separated when she was six years old, she remembers spending the earliest part of her childhood in Section 8 housing. She described this environment with her mother and brother as highly communal. When she was six, her mother married, and they relocated to a mostly white suburban community where they lived in a five-bedroom home with a pool. She reported this environment as isolating for her as a bi-racial child who was now being raised by two white parents. She struggled to form relationships with her stepfather and his two children. “We were a blended family who did not blend. My stepfather was emotionally neglectful.” It was clear that this family dynamic impacted her.

Her K-12 experiences were riddled with instances of racism, discrimination, and perseverance. Although seen as a “good school,” the private school she attended for K-3, is where she first saw race begin to impact her experiences. “I got paddled. My brother and I were the only kids of color.” She recalled needing to read aloud to comprehend text, and that was not allowed. So her academic needs were not met. In fourth grade, they moved to public schools. She recalls a mix of mostly white teachers, some who were advocates and some who posed additional barriers for her. “In 5th grade, I was not allowed to take a standardized test that would allow me to qualify for honors classes. I was the only child denied the right to take the exam.” By the time she reached high school, she excelled in academics and athletics. In particular, she was a skilled writer who was accused of plagiarizing due to the strength of her writing. Although her mother did not advocate for her, she recalled one teacher who pushed her to excel. After high school, she majored in math education and began her career as an educator. Her school experiences were impactful, driving her to pursue education, determined to provide a positive experience for students. Although most would describe her K-3 private, Jewish school as a “good” school, Dr. Lennette’s experience as a bi-racial, inquisitive, and bright little girl was unpleasant. Although she transitioned to a public school in fourth grade, the incidents of racial discrimination continued. For example, in fifth grade, Dr. Lennette was the only child in the classroom denied the opportunity to take a standardized test in which the results would be used for placement in honor courses. This type of racial discrimination was felt throughout her high school years. I felt deep empathy and anger as Dr. Lennette described the actions of her teachers. It was clear how deeply motivated she was to excel due to the actions of these teachers. Despite these challenges, Dr. Lennette excelled in academics, especially math and athletics.

Participant #2: Dr. Juliet

Dr. Juliet's tenure of 10 years has not been easy. She is one of two superintendents in the study who has served in multiple districts as superintendent. Dr. Juliet views this superintendency as an opportunity to impact more students due to the larger size of her current district in comparison to her former district. She has been working in a small, rural district in the southeast for four years. She has been married for 24 years and has been an educator for 28 years.

As one of ten children being raised on a farm, she recalls being taught values and a strong work ethic. "We weren't handed a lot, but we were taught very early on that education was important, and we had to be present." Since her father was a preacher, a great deal of time was spent in church." Dr. Juliet had mixed feelings about her public school education and the city where she grew up. It was majority white, and the school was not meeting her needs. Not only was she usually the only Black student, but she also only had two African American teachers. One was good and one was not so memorable. "As I reflect, I was just kind of pushed in the corner because I was very quiet." She recalls not having her parents advocate for her when it came to school and discussed her parents believing whatever the teacher said was right. She recalled having a learning deficiency in reading and getting additional interventions in the early years, specifically in fourth grade. She also recalled having some difficulties in math as well. One instance of racism she remembers is being singled out for being the only one who got a good grade on one test. By high school, academics began to improve. Although she became active in sports, she recalls not having a lot of social connections. Her siblings were her closest friends. There were ten of them and they were all remarkably close. "Our parents raised us to respect each other and have each other's backs." As I listened to her, it was obvious how instrumental her family

relationships have impacted her. Losing her father was especially tough, given the core values he instilled, as well as the closeness of their family.

Participant #3: Dr. Evelyn

Dr. Evelyn served for five years as superintendent in her district. Her suburban district has had seven superintendents and interim superintendents in 11 years. Dr. Evelyn is one of two participants in this study who left the superintendent by the study's conclusion. Dr. Evelyn is a mother and grandmother.

Dr. Evelyn was raised in a northern, urban city. She described her upbringing in her closely knit family as one with plenty of love, plenty of food, and being well taken care of. Her parents owned a two-story house with her grandfather and aunt residing upstairs. Other aunts, uncles, and cousins all lived within walking distance. She was raised by the village.

Although education was not discussed at length in their house, after her parents divorced, her mother wanted to ensure she and her siblings attended good schools. She was able to get them into a neighborhood catholic school. From second grade through eighth grade, she attended a private, Catholic school. After graduating from Catholic school in eighth grade, she attended a public high school. The public school was mostly white and located in a Jewish neighborhood. Once moving to this school, race came into play. She shared:

Since I was excelling in language arts, I remember a teacher walking me to another classroom. She had made some arrangements without me or my parents knowing. She ushered me into the room, and I remember not seeing anyone who looked like me. The receiving teacher was not welcoming, and I remember failing that class, especially after she accused me twice of plagiarism in front of the whole class. She said I could not have written what I wrote.

Despite the challenges faced at the school, Dr. Evelyn excelled and graduated as valedictorian.

Participant #4: Superintendent Lillie

After years in the small, rural school system in which she had spent her entire career, the superintendent position became available. Superintendent Lillie became the interim superintendent in 2019 and was then named the permanent superintendent of her school system. Along her journey, Superintendent Lillie got married and had one child.

She described her beginnings as humble. Her father was a single father who worked as a gravedigger raising eight children after the death of his wife. Lillie described losing her mother at the age of five as one of the toughest trials she had endured. In her mother's absence, she was raised by the village. She shared the importance of African American women teachers and women in her church as instrumental in her upbringing. As a child, she was raised by her older siblings and her dad. In their home, although education was not stressed, she recalled values such as Christianity, hard work, and family instilled throughout childhood. “We were taught by our dad: You have a relationship with the Almighty, you treat people like you want to be treated and you represent me. And you make sure that you are doing an excellent job of that because your reputation follows you.” Throughout her K-12 experience, Supt. Thomas described herself as an average student who worked hard to earn good grades to make her teachers and family proud.

Participant #5: Dr. Annie Bell

Dr. Annie Bell has served as the superintendent in the same rural school district in the south for 10 years. She credits strong relationships, instructional knowledge, and ability to work with all stakeholders for her longevity in the position. She has been married for 40 years and has one son.

Dr. Annie Bell was born in the Dominican Republic, where the primary language is Spanish. At the age of ten years, there was a civil war, causing her parents to relocate the family to the United States. With nothing and a huge language barrier, she entered elementary school in a large, urban city in the northern United States. She described the move as culture shock. With a lack of resources, she learned from her parents the importance of depending on family when you need help. She experienced this reliance on family friends firsthand as they were forced to live with another family. Watching her parents as factory workers allowed the importance of having a strong work ethic to be learned at an early age. Dr. Annie Bell described her home as caring with parents who knew the importance of education. Another value stressed in her home was religion. “My mom and dad were devout Catholics. They stressed the importance of having God in your life and turning to God.”

Driven to ensure their children had a better life, they stressed the importance of graduating from high school. She described the first few years of her school experience in the United States as exceedingly difficult because of the language and cultural barrier. She also recalled many instances of bullying. “We had challenges with completing assignments because we didn't have the support at home to complete those assignments. There wasn't a love of learning initially. I wanted to go to school. I knew I was going to get my education, but it was more about surviving.” She recalled having a mix of teachers. Specifically, she vividly remembers a teacher who did not meet her needs. “She did not know how to educate somebody like me. Her response was to put me in the back of the classroom and ignore me.” In contrast, she remembers having a supportive paraprofessional and a high school counselor who went above and beyond to help her.

She credits her high school counselor for ensuring she attended college. “My high school counselor decided that I was going to go to college. She helped me to fill out my college application and financial aid. She took me to visit colleges and chose the college I was going to attend.”

Participant #6: Dr. Tami

Dr. Tami served as superintendent of a large, urban district in the southeast. Dr. Tami is one of two participants who has served as superintendent in multiple districts. She is also one of two participants in the study who left the superintendent position by the study's end. Dr. Tami is a mother who spoke at great lengths about the importance of family.

Dr. Tami was born in the South and was one of four children in a tightly-knit family. Raised in a two-parent household, where values such as faith, the importance of an education, and the idea of embracing learning were instilled greatly. “My grandparents knew that education would be the great liberator for us, so we were taught to embrace whatever we got between our ears. No one could take it away from us.” Although her parents did not have a college degree, they were both career individuals. “For example, my father was a pastor for thirty years. He retired from being a pastor, but he was a full-contract pastor in several churches in the area. We valued being engaged and a part of the community.”

Dr. Tami had mostly fond memories of being a student. She loved school and by the time she made it to high school, she was involved in many activities such as varsity cheerleading, band, public speaking, and the National Beta Club. Although school was mostly positive, she does recall some instances of race relations. She said:

Dealing with mostly white folks who didn't always know how or what to do with a well-spoken, deeply curious Black girl and even in the culture being teased about being those

same things, I learned the importance of having to code-switch early. Before we even created that term, I was code-switching in high school and middle school.” She attended one of the largest high schools in the state at the time. While it was diverse, they were only a few years removed from segregation.

Instruments

Artifacts

Artifacts were requested as an instrument to further understand the essence of the participants’ experiences and came into play during the second interview. In the virtual setting, artifacts were either shown on the screen or simply described. Artifacts were mentioned as important for four of the six participants. Two participants showed their artifacts. Superintendent Lillie showed a cross given to her by a teacher when she was a building administrator. Dr. Evelyn showed Bible verses and signage in her house with positive/spiritual messages as important artifacts. Two of the participants described artifacts. Dr. Juliet mentioned podcasts and her Bible as an artifact that supports her daily. Dr. Annie Bell mentioned the awards and recognitions on the walls in her office as artifacts of importance.

The artifacts helped interpret the experiences of the participants. They illuminated the values, priorities, and strategies used by the women while serving in the position. They were also helpful in developing my new theory, spiritual resistance theory.

Reflexive journal

The data gleaned from the reflexive journal were also instrumental in developing the themes of this research study. Reflexivity is viewed as a valuable characteristic of crystallization. As I listened to the responses of the women, I captured my reactions. There were moments of empathy, sadness, and anger as participants shared details of their lived experiences. Throughout

the process, my preconceived notions and opinions changed. For example, before this study, I believed all Black women serving in the superintendent position in the southeast were impacted by the intersectionality of gender and race with race being felt the most. In other words, they endured both racial and gender discrimination. This belief was largely due to the previously conducted research I read and my experiences with discrimination as an educational leader. However, two of my participants spoke of the prevalence of gender discrimination more than racial discrimination. Also, one participant shared little experience with racial discrimination. I wrote about the fact that this surprised me. This and other notes from my journal impacted the conclusions that are included in Chapter five.

Semi-structured interviews

Like many qualitative researchers, most of the data were gleaned from the interviews. As previously described, Seidman's phenomenological interviewing (2019) allowed me to gain deep insight into the lived experiences of these women. The remainder of this chapter will describe the essence of the lived experiences of the Black women superintendents who participated in this study.

Lived experiences

The focus of phenomenological research is to describe the essence of a shared experience among participants. In this section, I will describe the phenomenon of the lived experiences of six Black women superintendents in the southeast by sharing a summary of their shared experiences, as well as differences in their lived experiences. This will hopefully help readers become more familiar with the phenomenon, including the barriers, challenges, and tips for success in the position.

Childhood/family experiences

Participants described their childhood and upbringing similarly. While four of them spoke of humble beginnings, riddled with economic hardships, two described their families as middle-class. All participants explained the role of hard work, family values, and relationships impacting their childhood experiences. Some common family values included religion, community, and education. They mostly described their families as closely-knit and shared the role of the “village” in raising them. Relationships with families have held an important and active role in their lives even today. All participants recalled issues of race surfacing during childhood. While most described the impact of race on their childhood as external, two of the participants spoke about the impact of race within their own families.

School experiences

There were many similarities in the participants’ lived experiences in school. Collectively they recalled a mixture of positive and negative experiences with teachers and peers. Two participants spoke of academic struggles, while the others described themselves as average or talented students. They described their motivations, the consequences of fewer family resources, and the influence of family, teachers, and classmates.

Recalling these moments from childhood were some of the most tender moments of the study. They used adjectives such as despicable and harsh as they described their childhood school experiences. Hearing the participants recall moments of personal struggle during childhood were some of the toughest moments of the interviews for me. It became crucial for me to rely on my reflexive journal to bracket my reactions. I recall feelings of hurt and anger plaguing my mind. As an educator, I was appalled at the actions of some of the educators they described.

Career pathway

The six participants mostly followed a traditional route to the superintendent position. Dr. Lennette began her career in education as a high school math teacher 27 years ago. Due to her passion for the urban environment, she spent most of her teaching career in urban schools. After years of teaching, she became a dean of students for two years while she finished her licensure to become an administrator. This role functioned like an assistant principal without teacher evaluations. Next, she became an assistant principal before transitioning to serve as a high school principal for six years. While a wonderful experience, there was much student violence, teacher turnover, low-performing teachers, and high leader turnover. This position brought great instances of success including removal from the priority school list. “We were the highest performing non-academic high school in the city.” Throughout this time, she earned a master’s and doctoral degrees. After the principal position, she moved to the district office as the executive officer of organizational development leading principal selection, principal development pipeline, and certain components of performance management. After a few years, she was recruited to another district in the state as a learning community superintendent. Due to the success with her schools, she was named to her current position in the same district, which is deputy superintendent.

Dr. Juliet has spent 28 years in education. After majoring in education, Dr. Juliet spent time as a substitute. She has risen through the ranks as a teacher, an assistant principal, a principal, a supervisor of elementary schools, a director of pre-k, and a chief academic officer before being hired as a superintendent. She spent only a half year as assistant principal before being promoted to an elementary school principalship for four years. She was then asked to move to the district office as a supervisor of elementary schools before becoming chief academic officer. Again, after only six months in the position, she became superintendent in a neighboring district

where she served for six years. She credits her experience as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal for laying a great foundation for her to be successful in the superintendent position. She is now serving in her second superintendency and is the longest-serving Black woman superintendent in her state with 10 years of experience in the position.

Dr. Evelyn's career in education spans 33 years. Getting married and starting a family directly after high school, Dr. Evelyn decided to pursue a college degree after having three children. Now living in a different state, she became a teacher and obtained a master's degree in math and science. She also began work on her doctorate while teaching until she was approached and encouraged to pursue administration due to her strengths as a teacher leader. Although she never aspired to be an administrator, she accepted an assistant principalship and participated in district training on the path to becoming a principal. Subsequently, she served as principal of a Title I school for seven years. She had remarkable success there and led the school from underperforming to a highly performing school recognized by the governor and the International Reading Association. To fully focus on completing her doctorate, Dr. Evelyn resigned and took an adjunct professor position at the university where she was attending. She was then recruited to return to her previous district to oversee AP courses and the magnet programs as director of the division of accelerated and enriched instruction. Dr. Evelyn held several positions at the district level including director of the innovation intervention network where she worked with some of the lowest performing schools in the district, director of intervention schools, and executive director to the deputy superintendent of teaching and learning, which functioned like a chief of staff position in a neighboring district. While there, the deputy superintendent landed a superintendent position in a southern state. She transitioned with him and became chief academic officer. When he decided to leave, she began to explore career opportunities. Although not initially

aspiring to become superintendent and encouraged by someone else, she applied and secured the superintendent position in her current district.

Superintendent Lillie is a unique participant in this study as she has only been an educator in one school district, the one in which she is currently serving as superintendent. She began as a special education teacher and has held the following positions: assistant principal, curriculum director, federal programs director, interim superintendent, and superintendent. She has been an educator for 27 years. Upon graduation from the university, Supt. Lillie began her career at the local elementary school as a special education teacher. She loved teaching and never imagined leaving the classroom. After eight years of teaching, her superintendent saw her leadership potential and encouraged her to consider taking on an assistant principal position. “I was excited about that position because I was able to make even more of an impact. I got a chance to touch more students and their families.” She acquired two master’s degrees along the way and moved into educational leadership. She held the assistant principal position for 10 years. In this role, she also appreciated being able to help families secure resources. Again, approached by her superintendent, a Black woman she admired and respected, to consider leading at the district level. This time, she became the curriculum and federal programs director. This position allowed her to gain the middle and high school perspective as she supported all three schools in the district before moving into the superintendency.

As the first person in her family to attend college, Dr. Annie Bell knew early on she wanted to pursue a career that would allow her to help people. Considering social work and education, she chose to become an elementary teacher. She soon got married and had one son. While teaching, she completed her master’s degree and was approached by administrators about transitioning into leadership. After three years as an assistant principal, she was encouraged by her

principal to pursue the principalship. Her leadership journey took her to several states as she moved from assistant principal to principal, assistant superintendent of curriculum, deputy superintendent, and then superintendent. She has served in her current district for 10 years as superintendent.

Dr. Tami had less of a traditional route to the superintendency when compared to the other participants in this study. Upon graduating high school, she decided she would attend a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Although she initially planned to become a lawyer, she decided to take a job in the northeastern region of the United States as a fourth-grade teacher at a private school for one year, a position that did not require a teaching certificate. She then decided to return home and became a mom. Still not certified to teach, she was allowed to teach eighth grade. After two years of teaching, Dr. Tami received a master's degree in school counseling and an education specialist degree in counselor education. For five years she worked as a school counselor before being recruited to join the district office for three years as leader of the school counseling program. Upon earning leadership certification three years in, her principal was pushing her toward leadership. Instead of becoming an assistant principal, she relocated to another district and became the director of student services while finishing her dissertation. The journey would lead to additional district-level positions in multiple states such as executive director of student services and chief academic officer. While serving as the chief academic officer, the superintendent was forced to resign, and she was named deputy superintendent. After only a brief time and a few rejections for superintendent vacancies, she landed her first superintendency where she served for three years. Success in that position led to her landing a second superintendency, where she served for three years.

When thinking of preparation for the superintendent position, the participants named various positions as instrumental in providing them with the necessary expertise and skills. Several participants credited the principal position as most beneficial in propelling them toward the superintendency. Commonly served positions for the participants were teacher, assistant principal, principal, and chief academic officer.

Current experiences

The lived experiences of the Black women superintendents in the study have been filled with challenges and successes. Since all of them led during the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges related to the school shutdown were discussed at length, along with other challenges. They cited known challenges such as teacher shortages, sickness, learning loss, limited access to resources, and teaching virtually as huge barriers. “We certainly have more vacancies than we have ever had. Those vacancies lie in critical areas such as math, CTE, and special education” said Dr. Evelyn. Dr. Tami named leading during the COVID-19 pandemic as a major challenge of her superintendency. “I was given a charge, but they did not give me all the puzzle pieces because of COVID-19. I also was not given the grace and time to figure out the gaps.”

Issues of racial and gender discrimination were discussed as challenges in their lived experience of the superintendency. Dr. Lennette spoke about the fact that the top of the public school system is still very gendered and unequal. And even more unequal for the Black female. “There's a lot of us in the number two seats in districts all over the country. Many of us are sitting under White men.” Many students in her district have seen success due to her efforts, however, the credit will not be given to her. “We still sit in the system that prioritizes male leadership to female leadership and prioritizes White leadership over Black leadership.” Multiple participants mentioned board relations as a challenge. One participant mentioned this challenge being

due to the racial makeup of the school board. She felt as though racial biases influenced how the school board worked with her. “For the first time in the school district’s history, the Board is made up of mostly women who are also White. Those two factors have made it the most challenging to collaborate with them.” She felt as though most of the challenges were from those White men and White women. In this position, Dr. Juliet reported the barrier of stereotypes such as the belief that Black women are loud and aggressive. She is quite different. She is mild-mannered and quiet. She also named several other challenges such as funding, neighborhood gangs, and a desegregation court order that has been in place for years. Dr. Annie Bell shared the challenge of overcoming stereotypes about Black families and low expectations for children of color. Dr. Annie Bell discussed racial discrimination among community stakeholders such as architects. “I was treated as if I did not know, or I did not know what I was talking about. I felt it in that environment that gender and race had a part to play in those interactions.” Experiencing racial discrimination from the Black community, in addition to the White community, was a barrier to overcome by Dr. Annie Bell. The Black community believed I was not doing everything that you were supposed to do. Other than race and the pandemic, participants named barriers such as funding, neighborhood gangs, and poverty as barriers they have worked to overcome.

These moments of vulnerability as the women shared their current challenges related to race and gender were triggering for me, as I (and many other Black women) share similar experiences. I recalled a particular challenge of a fellow school leader who dealt with a difficult board member. Personally, Dr. Annie Bell’s experience of being treated as incompetent resonated with my time as a school principal in a toxic environment. Again, my journal was helpful as I documented my responses to their stories.

Despite the challenges and barriers, the participants were able to share various successes realized in their districts during their tenure. Dr. Lennette named several successes for her district such as improvements in student achievement. "We've seen great improvements in third-grade reading and reached the highest proficiency we've ever seen." Dr. Juliet's students are not yet reaching higher proficiencies, but they have also seen gains in student achievement. Dr. Juliet spoke proudly about being able to provide students with exposure they would not normally have due to their family poverty. Dr. Evelyn said her students grew tremendously towards proficiency in 2021-2022. They had more students and schools exceeding growth than any other school district in the state. They outpaced the state in some of their formative assessments, which provides some indications of how early learners are doing with literacy. Their graduation rate increased from 82% to 90.8% percent. Dr. Evelyn also described the positive impact on the culture in their district as over 80% of teachers described the culture as positive. Increasing the number of teachers of color in their district to be more aligned with the population of students has also been a success for Dr. Evelyn. Superintendent Lillie named seeing students receive multiple accolades for their post-secondary life and growth in ELA achievement as points of pride. Successes were easy for Dr. Annie Bell to name due to her longevity in the position and district as it related to student and district success. Before the pandemic, the district saw great gains in literacy on state assessments. Innovation and removing non-academic barriers have been key priorities in her district. They are offering early learning opportunities to students through the implementation of a Head Start program that serves three-year-olds to five-year-olds and opening a Montessori academy that serves six-week-old babies up to age five. These have been key initiatives. Due to the needs of her students and families, it has been important that they focus on removing non-academic barriers. For instance, they have been able to provide free laundry facilities in some of the

schools for families. Removing the barrier of dirty clothes improved student attendance and confidence. Another point of pride is their ability to provide wrap-around services to students through a federal grant and partnership with a local university by opening a school-based health clinic in their district. This provision means children who do not have insurance can get healthcare free of charge. Last year they added telemedicine to support mental health services. They have also experienced success with traditional programming such as increasing AP and dual enrollment courses, improving graduation rates, and earning recognition for their fine arts program where they offer art, music, band, dance, theater, and violin. Dr. Tami described success as academic gains for students such as turning around low-performing schools, most of which serve many African American students. In addition, she named a focus on student agency, corporate partnerships, and innovation. Corporate partnerships have allowed schools to have more discretionary funds to implement some of the innovations.

Each participant discussed their successes and strategies for success while serving as superintendent. As far as personal successes, Dr. Lennette named being successful at visionary purpose setting. "I can convey why we do the work well in a way that people are compelled and want to follow." One example is how she has been able to build systems and structures to make things happen. Lofty expectations for herself and the people she works with have been the driver of her success. Dr. Lennette has also focused on capacity building with leaders. Dr. Juliet has seen many personal successes as the longest-standing Black woman superintendent in her state. She takes pride in the additional work of mentoring young ladies, and aspiring leaders and gaining confidence in advocating for herself. Dr. Evelyn and Dr. Tami spoke of the strength of Black women. Dr. Evelyn attributes some of her success to the fact that she is a strong Black woman.

“As Black women, an advantage we have is the ability to handle challenges. That is what we do. We certainly understand discrimination, and we understand what it feels like to truly be welcomed. When you have been oppressed, that gives greater appreciation. So, my race and gender put me in a position to be an advocate for all children, not just the oppressed.” Dr. Tami also spoke of the strength of Black women. “We arrive here prepared to take on battles and conquer them, not even knowing. We have everything we need and even when we think we do not, we figure out how and we do it.” Additionally, multiple participants named their love of God, as well as a love for people as being at the core of who they are. They spoke of close circles of friends, regular routines of exercise, prayer, and self-care as instrumental to success. For example, Dr. Juliet relies on self-care, nightly Bible reading, morning motivational messages or music, and reading as strategies for success. She also named servant leadership and support from family and friends as instrumental to her success. Being able to work with anyone has been a successful strategy for Dr. Annie Bell. Due to her excellent relationship-building skills, she has been able to overcome racial and/or gender discrimination. She also spoke of the relationship she has been able to build with the school board. She named the collaboration between the superintendent and the board as key to this work.

Superintendent Lillie is proud to have risen from humble beginnings to superintendent. “I’m able to show my daughter that, whatever your heart desires, regardless of the struggles, if you first and foremost put God first and do the work, you can be whatever.” Some other personal successes include the ability to delegate, work collaboratively with a team, mentor young ladies in the community, rely on God consistently, and commit to servant leadership. She credits the relationships she has built over the years, her reputation, and her relationship with God as keys to her success. “I don’t see how superintendents navigate their responsibility without a relationship

with God.” She also shared a cross she received from a friend, as well as her favorite Bible verses as artifacts. Another important source of strength has been her support system of family and friends.

These women have employed many strategies to overcome the challenges. Dr. Evelyn mentioned the infusion of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) dollars helped navigate the pandemic, especially in acquiring the language arts curriculum they currently use. At least three of the five years are on the ESSER grant. “We certainly used it for human resources. We were able to put additional support in the schools around social-emotional wellness and mental health staff in support of teachers and students. We are working with the community, working with community agencies. We increased instructional support for learning recovery. Dr. Juliet’s team has employed some strategies such as community partnerships, creative uses of federal funding, and competitive pay to offset some of the challenges. Superintendent Lillie named a few creative solutions to contend with the challenges such as alternative teacher certifications, partnership with the university, and utilization of ESSER funds to hire additional intervention staff. Dr. Evelyn mentioned the importance of collaboration and treating your team well. Personally, Dr. Tami has relied heavily on her faith as a source of strength and a factor in her success. Additionally, she named strong relationships with family and close friends as contributing to her success while in the position.

As the women proudly shared their accomplishments in the position, I could see the joy beam in their eyes. Thriving in toxic environments when naysayers used tactics of racial and gender discrimination felt victorious for them. I could feel tears of happiness in my eyes as they shared accomplishment after accomplishment.

Advice to Black women superintendent aspirants

For these ladies, participating in the study was an opportunity to share their truths, but they also described it as an opportunity to give to future Black women superintendents. They were proud to offer various nuggets of advice to Black women aspiring to the superintendency. The most popular advice given was to maintain a supportive circle such as mentors, other superintendents, and family. Four of the participants said it is critical. Also, widely mentioned was the advice to remain committed to students. Additionally, multiple participants mentioned the importance of acquiring the necessary skills and expertise due to the positions held on the pathway to the superintendent position. They recommended the principalship and assistant principalship mostly. But also recommended district office positions such as principal supervision, directors of curriculum and federal programs, and any other position that will increase opportunities to grow your instructional leadership and communication skills, practice interacting with various stakeholders, and network. Other responses included: do your research about the role and responsibilities of a superintendent, find the district whose priorities align with your values, and pursue the position no matter how many times you are told no. Less popular responses included: building relationships with all stakeholders including the board of education, understanding the strength needed to handle the microaggressions and double standards you will face, hiring well, knowing who you are as a Black woman, and prioritizing balance and self-care.

Findings

During the interviews, the six participants in this study described their lived experiences from childhood, leading to the superintendency, and current experiences. During the analysis, five themes were discovered: overcoming racial and gender discrimination in childhood, race

and gender in the workplace, motivation to lead, the impact of lived experiences on their leadership, and faith and family as sources of strength.

Theme 1: Overcoming racial and gender discrimination in childhood

Race and gender have impacted all six participants in many ways. Five of the participants described the role of race and gender in their lived experiences dating back to childhood. Specific childhood examples included: being the only Black student in K-12 classes, experiencing direct racial discrimination from peers, teachers, and even family, and even being a non-English speaking student. Dr. Lennette, who is bi-racial, shared her experiences of moving from a neighborhood in which she felt seen and heard to a White neighborhood, in which she was raised by two White parents. She shared how she struggled to build relationships with her White stepsiblings and parents.

She felt emotionally neglected by her stepfather. “I suffered sexual abuse at the hands of white men. I lived with that feeling of devaluing and of the inability of adults to protect me and making meaning of the isolation of being a young child who must carry heavy things without help.” These feelings continued at school as she was on the receiving end of various instances of racial discrimination by teachers. Although seen as a “good school,” the private school she attended for K-3, is where she first saw race begin to impact her experiences. “I got paddled. My brother and I were the only kids of color.” She recalled needing to hear herself read and that was not allowed, so her academic needs were not met. In fourth grade, they moved to public schools. She recalls a mix of mostly White teachers, some who were advocates and some who posed additional barriers for her. “In 5th grade, I was not allowed to take a standardized test that would allow me to qualify for honors classes. I was the only child denied the right to take the exam.”

Similarly, Dr. Evelyn experienced colorism at home amongst the family so race and skin color began to impact her at an early age. “In my family, there is this thing about skin color. I have lighter skin, so that was an issue in terms of growing up. I felt like it was me against the world.” Again, those feelings of discrimination continued at school as she was accused of cheating by one of her teachers because of her literacy strengths.

Dr. Lillie was raised in a primarily White small town, in which she was the only Black student in most of her classes. She shared feelings of being left out by classmates daily. Dr. Tami mentioned being supported by her White teachers until she shared her aspirations of attending a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). She shared, “I had people always championing, pushing, and supporting me. And when it was time for college, I had the White administrators and leaders say to a Black, high-achieving girl, why would you go to a Black school? So, race hit me hard in high school.” Finally, Dr. Annie Bell described her experiences of ridicule by classmates as she did not speak English when she moved to the United States. All these childhood experiences were memorable and painful but motivated participants to be successful in life.

Theme 2: Race and gender in the workplace

Each of the participants spoke of the impact of race and gender throughout their careers. They detailed experiences from the beginning of their education careers to the present day. Dr. Tami was able to give many examples of the impact of race throughout her career such as seeing racial discrimination against her daughter in school, a racial incident that led to the dismissal of a superintendent, being quietly paid to leave a position in which her supervisor did not want to work with her, and navigating race relations with her board as she served as superintendent. Dr. Lennette spoke of working in a district in which certain words like equity and privilege are for-

bidden and not receiving credit for her work but credit being awarded to her White male supervisor. Dr. Evelyn described race as a daily factor in her work. She spoke passionately about the constant pushback and questioning she receives when making decisions. Dr. Juliet and Dr. Annie Bell mentioned experiencing racial discrimination. Dr. Juliet shared a horrific experience of being asked to illegally fire some staff by a Black male on her school board. "I've felt discrimination, especially from African American men who I've been told I should know my place." Superintendent Lillie mentioned racial discrimination from community stakeholders. She mentioned seeking corporate sponsorships and a particular historical donor stopped donating to the school district when she became superintendent. She feels it is due to her race.

All but one of them spoke of the need to shift who they are as they operate as superintendents. While holding on to their values, the shifts are more superficial, such as ensuring their appearance meets White cultural norms, attending to the tone of their voice, and even shifting their vocabulary. Dr. Lennette added, "I do my nails. I show up in the space with an executive presence, but that does not bother me. I just feel like it is required of me, or there's additional scrutiny. I am living by different rules, but those rules feel a little bit superficial."

Due to her unique situation, Superintendent Lillie feels she can show up authentically in all ways in her position. When asked why they feel the need to shift, there was a resounding response about increased scrutiny. Dr. Lennette answered, "I would be seen as less credible. People are good with our people being sloppy and messy."

Theme 3: Motivation to lead

When asked about their motivation for pursuing education, responses varied. "When I became a teacher, teachers were highly respected/regarded. This, along with the influence of my father and close circle of friends, made teaching an obvious choice," said Superintendent Lillie.

Dr. Juliet also gave credit to her father for choosing education as a career. “I was caring for my siblings as a babysitter. Part of it was seeing that I could nurture others and it was also my dad's vision. He steered me in the right direction.” Dr. Lennette spoke of her characteristics as she described her choice to become a teacher. “I have always been a leader like the student body president in high school and student government. I have always been in roles where I want to bring about change, even as a little kid.” Dr. Evelyn and Dr. Annie Bell knew they wanted to help people and considered careers in nursing and social work but ended up choosing education. Dr. Tami sought to become a lawyer. However, their experiences as undergraduates led her to teach, and she never looked back.

Commonalities arose when asked about the decision to move into leadership. All participants shared they were approached by others and encouraged to pursue leadership as their leadership skills shone through while working as teachers or counselors. Due to the small size of her district, Superintendent Lillie’s work was seen by her superintendent. She decided to move into the assistant principalship and later a district office position due to her superintendent’s encouragement. Dr. Evelyn stated, “I never aspired to be an assistant principal or principal. I did not aspire to any of the roles I have held other than that of a teacher. I was happy as a teacher. I worked for principals who let me do my thing. But I could do more than teach.” Dr. Tami talked about her characteristics. “I am keenly aware that I was created to lead and advocate for children. It is a different kind of leadership requiring a different kind of showing up. I was raised to be a servant leader.”

So why did they seek to become superintendents? All participants named the opportunity to impact students as their reason for pursuing the position. Dr. Evelyn said, “I do like challenges, and I knew I could have a greater impact on more children.” Dr. Juliet shared, “In those

other positions, somebody was still making decisions above my head. I wanted to be the one who sat in the seat to make those decisions. But even though I sit in this seat, there is somebody else always making decisions, my voice matters and I can impact outcomes for my kids.” According to Dr. Lennette, “I want all our children to be well, and I have a huge question mark about what can be done at a district level. I am continuing to ask these bigger questions of what is possible and being a part of the change of what is possible.” Superintendent Thomas also discussed the scale of impact at the superintendent level.

Theme 4: Impact of lived experiences on their leadership

Many of the lived experiences of the participants impact who they are as leaders. Supt. Lillie grew up as a middle child. “I remember not always having that voice. I felt as though I did not have my parents’ ears growing up because I am one of ten. That has allowed me to take a step back and be more of a listener for my staff because I learned early on there is a time to speak, and there is a time to listen. I remember those times when I was silent a lot and that is a benefit in this job.” Dr. Juliet spoke about her upbringing and the impact it has on how she leads. “We were not handed a lot. But we were handed values and a strong work ethic.” Dr. Evelyn also spoke about the impact of growing up in the city and how it plays into how she leads. “I had to learn how to fight. I learned to be a self-starter and not need a lot of pats on the back.” Dr. Tami also spoke about the impact of her upbringing on her commitment to servant leadership. “I grew up in a family where my parents created within us this commitment to being in service and to think more of others sometimes than we thought of ourselves.” Dr. Lennette has intentionally chosen to teach and lead in urban spaces because of her lived experiences as a student. Dr. Annie Bell shared how she has been driven to excel. She recalled specifically how she was treated by

her fifth-grade teacher. “I have always worked hard trying to prove to myself I could do it. Whatever negative thoughts people had about me because of the matrix that made me who I am as a person, I wanted to prove them wrong, especially my fifth-grade teacher who provided me with a miserable learning environment.”

Theme 5: Faith and family as sources of strength

The participants of this study have seen remarkable success personally and professionally. They were able to name increases in student achievement, providing mental health and medical services such as telehealth to students and families, improving graduation rates, introducing innovative practices, corporate sponsorships, and many more points of pride. Two of the participants have served 10 years in the position; two of them have served as superintendents in two districts; two of them are the longest-serving Black women superintendents in their states, and all but one of them have earned doctoral degrees.

To achieve their great accomplishments, they shared some strategies and sources of strength. They could not overemphasize the importance of building relationships, effective communication, instructional expertise, hiring well, the ability to think critically, and collaborating with others. Two main sources of strength arose while interviewing participants: faith and family. All spoke of the need to surround themselves with an inner circle for advice and support as they navigate the waters of the position. Dr. Tami spoke at length about the role of mentors and family in her life. She spoke about her mother, grandmothers, daughter, brothers, former supervisors, and professors whom she has leaned on for sources of strength and support throughout her journey. Dr. Annie Bell spoke of the importance of her core circle. “I have a core group of friends I can depend on. Those friends, along with the network of folks I have as mentors and

colleagues I trust and value their opinion, I can turn to them during those tough times we encounter.”

In addition to the family, all participants spoke at length of their strong reliance on God and faith. Superintendent Lillie said, “I don't see how superintendents navigate their responsibility without a relationship with God.” Dr. Lennette also shared, “I'm a Christian and my faith drives me.” They shared daily practices of prayer, meditation, and Bible reading as essential for surviving and thriving in the position of superintendent. Dr. Juliet said, “I have time in the morning when I listen to podcasts or inspirational messages. It is about refueling myself so I can give all day long. I try to get myself and my feelings out of the way so I can just help other people.” Artifacts such as crosses, Bible verses, inspirational quotes, podcasts, and gospel music can be seen in their offices and homes as reminders of their purpose for doing their work. “I surround myself with things that encourage me like scriptures,” replied Dr. Evelyn. Dr. Annie Bell shared a similar quote as she discussed the artifacts she relies on for strength, “I have a wall full of recognitions I have received from the time I was a classroom teacher to the time I became superintendent. Those remind me at that moment in time, I can look around and see the successes I have had, and the situation I am dealing with does not define me.”

Interconnectedness of themes

In qualitative research, researchers conduct thematic analysis to determine themes, their connections, and conflicts. Specifically in this study, the use of the hermeneutic circle created space for me to interpret the experiences of each participant and compare their experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Connections and conflict between themes help to further understand the essence of participants' lived experiences. In this study, participants described mostly similar experiences. However, I did notice one conflict between the themes.

Relationship between themes

All themes in this study are interconnected. From childhood to the present day, all participants shared stories of racial and/or gender discrimination. In many cases, those experiences and other lived experiences directly impacted their motivation to lead and their leadership actions. For example, Dr. Annie Bell connected her coming to the United States as an immigrant and her experiences as a student to her motivation to lead and how she connects with students today:

I do not know what my life would have been like if those educators had not cared about me. But I also had educators who did not care about me and did not support me. I think all of that was motivation for me to do better and to prove myself along the way.

Dr. Juliet gave a similar example of the connection between her family upbringing and her leadership:

I am grateful for the way I was brought up even though it was a struggle, you know, we were in poverty, and we did not have the things our friends had. It was just a tough upbringing. I am grateful for the experience because now it leaves me the opportunity to understand what my students go through.

Dr. Lennette spoke of a traumatic experience that motivates her to be successful and do meaningful work:

Sexual abuse at the hands of white men. That feeling of devaluation and of the inability of adults to protect me and make meaning of the isolation of being a young child who must carry heavy things without help. All that drives me.

Faith and family were named as sources of strength, and they were also connected to their motivation to lead. Dr. Evelyn said, "This is the work that God has called me to, for such a time as this. So, therefore, he equips me and clears paths." Dr. Lillie responded, "God does not bless

us just for us, he blesses us to be able to give back. So, I try to use that with every life I touch.

Finally, Dr. Tami shared:

As a woman of faith, growing up in a family where my parents, not only instilled in me those core values, but they created within us this commitment to being in service and giving back and to think more of others sometimes than we think of ourselves.

Conflict between themes

One conflict between themes arose while analyzing the data. While all participants described race and gender in the workplace, some felt the impact on their leadership more than others. The three participants leading small, rural districts reported less of a prevalence of known racial discrimination in their current setting. In their experiences, they spoke of only a few instances of racial discrimination. Instead, they weighed gender discrimination as more impactful to their experiences. One example from a participant, “I haven't had to experience any of that, but it just depends on the region and where you are.” The same participant added, “The perception has been that this job is for males who don't look like me, and because of that, I think a lot of Black women are just not up for the battle.” Another participant responded, “I saw that discrimination from a Black male on the school board only.” The third participant shared:

I felt that some community stakeholders such as architects and construction companies felt because I am female, they treated me as if I did not have the knowledge and did not know what I was talking about. I felt in that environment that gender and race had a part to play in those interactions. But not outside of that.

On the contrary, those leading larger suburban or urban districts gave many examples of the presence of racial discrimination in their current experience and its impact on their leadership. When asked about the presence of racial discrimination, one participant replied:

It is there. Sometimes it is subtle and sometimes it is blatant. And as a black woman, it just becomes second nature. I mean, it is just a part of the work. You just know it is going to be there. You know it when you see it. I have called it out. I cannot tell you how many times I have been mistaken for everything but the superintendent.

Another participant mentioned, “We have three members of our school board who are openly racist.” Reputation and relationships countered racial discrimination for half of the participants in this study. The varied experiences related to racial discrimination emphasize the role of context for a Black woman serving in the position. It is also interesting that two of the participants who mentioned fewer instances of racial discrimination have served for ten years in the position. This conflict in responses provides a glimmer of hope that some Black women superintendents might be able to serve in their positions for longer periods.

Summary of Findings

Chapter four presents the findings of this study. Data provided by the six participants align with the literature reviewed. The participants' lived experiences align with previously conducted studies as they described their lived experiences as superintendents and their other lived experiences. Among the data shared, five themes arose: overcoming racial and gender discrimination in childhood, race and gender in the workplace, motivation to lead, the impact of lived experiences on their leadership, and faith and family as sources of strength. They provided examples of discrimination, stereotypes, and barriers/challenges. They also provided examples of success, strategies for navigating the position, and sources of strength. Their experiences illuminate the marginalization of Black women, the intersectionality of race and gender, as well as the strength of Black women to endure and thrive in demanding situations. In Chapter five, I will

make meaning of these findings through a discussion of theoretical, practical, and policy implications. I will also share the limitations of this study and suggestions for future inquiry.

5 DISCUSSION

Phenomenological research provides an opportunity for the researcher to gain insight into the lived experience of participants to understand the essence of their lived experiences. This phenomenology aimed to add to the existing body of literature on the problem of disproportionate representation of Black women in the position of public school superintendent by gaining a detailed description of the lived experiences of six Black women superintendents in the southeast. Previous existing data shows a disproportionate representation of Black women in the public school superintendency (White, 2023; Kowalski, 2011; Mason, 2021). To address the disproportionate representation, we must continue to explore the lived experiences of those who have served in the position. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the Southeast. The study also sought to contribute to the existing literature to further illuminate the barriers, challenges, and strategies for the success of Black women superintendents. The research question was: *What are the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the Southeast?* The data obtained from semi-structured interviews with six participants answers this question thoroughly. Seidman's three-part semi-structured interview (2019) format allowed for an extended time with each participant, allowing them to show vulnerability by sharing deeply personal stories with me. It created opportunities to build deep relationships with each participant. During the interviews, I asked specific questions regarding their early life, and experiences leading to and while serving in the position. I inquired about their barriers/challenges, successes, and sources of strength and motivation. Finally, in the third interview, they were asked to make meaning of all their lived experiences and the impact on their leadership. As a qualitative study, the intent of this study was not to generalize. Therefore, I aimed to listen deeply to each woman's story to understand the phenomenon of being a Black

woman superintendent. Data from the interviews revealed the impact of race and gender on their lived experiences as superintendents, regardless of their current context, career pathways, prior life experiences, or degrees earned. This chapter will explain how the data found answers the research question through (a) a summary of findings related to the themes found, (b) connections to existing literature, (c) implications, (d) limitations, and (e) recommendations for future inquiry.

Summary of findings

Chapter 4 presented an analysis of the data retrieved from the semi-structured interviews with Black women serving in superintendent positions in the Southeast. Through 18 hours of virtual interviews, three per participant, I sought to discover the commonalities of the six participants, while also discovering the unique experiences each of them had. While the participants' experiences varied, many commonalities were found. Five themes emerged from the data: overcoming racial and gender discrimination in childhood, race and gender in the workplace, motivation to lead, the impact of lived experiences on their leadership, and faith and family as sources of strength. The women in this study perceive their lived experiences as superintendents as purposeful but riddled with various challenges and barriers. Among the challenges was racial and gender discrimination. Although the degree to which they have experienced discrimination varied by context, each participant validated the impact of racial and gender discrimination in their lived experiences.

Overcoming racial and gender discrimination in childhood

The data from this study suggests the presence of racial and gender discrimination in the lived experiences of these Black women superintendents dating back to childhood. The women

in this study have overcome discrimination since childhood from family, community stakeholders, educators, and peers. Their stories represent the experiences of many of us and are a testament to the undeniable strength of Black women. This data affirms previous research related to the strength of Black women (Angel et al., 2013; Wiley, 2014).

Overcoming childhood racial and gender discrimination was a theme of this study not found in previously researched topics. Participants spoke at length about the impact of racial and gender discrimination since childhood. I wonder if this finding is a result of the time in which these women grew up as they were growing up in the civil rights era when discrimination was prevalent. I also wonder if overcoming these challenges early in life equipped them with the courage and strength to endure the unfair treatment they faced later in life and presently. One participant discussed the toughness she has built from her life experiences, causing her not to fold easily under pressure, not require constant praise and recognition, and wit to survive tough situations. However, although they overcame childhood discrimination, the impact of those experiences is obvious. While the discrimination mostly led to motivation, those negative experiences shed light on why many of them are exhausted. The participants have endured decades of discrimination since their ages span from mid-forties to sixties. No wonder there were sentiments of exhaustion and frustration. About the disparity in representation of Black women in the position, could it be that many qualified and capable Black women are choosing not to subject themselves to such treatment and self-selecting other positions with less stress and less blatant discrimination? With more research being conducted on this topic, one participant mentioned this possibility.

Race and gender in the workplace

Racial and gender discrimination continues to rear its ugly head in workplaces throughout the United States. For example, two-thirds of women reported experiencing discriminatory microaggressions in the workplace and according to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), women filed 78% of sexual harassment charges between 2018 and 2021. Additionally, according to statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor, as of 2022 women earn 83% of what men were paid. Black women were paid only 64% of what non-Hispanic men were paid. Consequences of this discrimination are seen and felt by many and show up as unequal pay, lack of diversity in certain positions and occupations, employment rates, job satisfaction, and turnover, decreased productivity, and overall impact on health and wellness.

In addition to these statistics, race and gender discrimination in the workplace have been widely documented in previously conducted research. Responses from the participants in this study validated previous research regarding decades of inequities in the workplace for Black women. The study's findings confirm the continued existence of blatant and subtle racial and gender discriminatory acts in their lived experiences leading to their appointments as superintendent, as well as while serving in the position. Like participants in previously conducted research, they expressed multiple instances of being treated differently than their male counterparts (Bernal et al., 2017; Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Wolverton & McDonald, 2001). Participants provided countless examples of differential treatment as they spoke about the differences as compared to their White male counterparts or predecessors. Differences in everyday discourse and funding from community partnership support were shared. Findings related to funding align with Donohoo and Hunter's (2005) study in which they shared examples of how African American women superintendents face differences in financial resources. It was painful to hear about the

blatant mistreatment some of them have endured. From being publicly attacked by school board members, dismissed from positions without just cause, being held to different expectations, having their ideas dismissed, or needing to suppress their talent by feeding their ideas through White colleagues. The list goes on and on. The differential treatment described by the participants is consistent with Patricia Collins' Black feminist thought (1990) on the intersection of race and gender in the lived experiences of Black women. As Collins stated, these participants certainly face the double bind of being Black and being women. While members of our society love to brag about the progress we have made, segregation and discrimination are still very much alive, even in 2024.

Motivation to lead

Although my research question did not specifically address motivation, it plays an active role in the lived experiences of these participants. As they described how they tackle the daily challenges of the position, they described their motivation as a tool for strength. They expressed mostly commonalities as they described their motivation to lead and rely on their motivation to remain in the position.

The role of motivation and various motivation theories have been researched for years. As I interviewed the participants, motivation was a theme in the findings. Although there are many motivation theories, McClelland's Theory of Acquired Needs (1961) arose for me as I listened to their responses. The main assertion of this theory is that humans' motivations and behaviors are a result of three emotional needs: achievement, power, and affiliation (World of Work Project, 2019). Achievement and power showed up as motivation for the participants, while affiliation was absent. I found this interesting as it matched the findings of Bredson et al. (1995). They surveyed and interviewed 39 award-winning superintendents throughout the United

States to determine their motivational needs. They found that 89.7% of participants identified a high need for power. Achievement was the second-highest rated factor with 71.8% identifying it as a need. Affiliation came in last with only 30.8% identifying it as a need. It is important to note findings related to McClelland's (1961) Theory of Acquired Needs because there are preconceptions regarding why Black women pursue superintendents. This finding might either validate or refute someone's opinion. In my case, it refuted my opinion as I believed affiliation would show up as a motivator. As a Black woman, feeling a part of a group (an affiliation) has felt important to me due to the discrimination I have faced. It was surprising to find that affiliation was not mentioned as a motivator for any of the participants.

My questions required participants to reflect on their motivation to pursue education, move into leadership positions, and pursue the superintendent position. When asked about their motivation to lead, participants spoke mostly about the decision to transition from teacher to leader. Four of these participants shared how they never wanted to be administrators. Also, the main reason for pursuing leadership for most of them was encouragement by a mentor or supervisor just as Murphy found in her 2009 study. Murphy (2009) conducted a study of superintendents to understand what motivates women to aspire to the superintendency. Murphy found three themes: a person of influence such as a family member or role model, a desire to seek challenges or competition, and their doctoral program with an emphasis on superintendent succession. Familial and community role models influenced their motivation to move into leadership initially. As we discussed motivation to pursue and remain in the superintendent position, like Murphy's participants, these participants mentioned serving in the position because of their desire to seek challenges and serve where they have the authority to make important decisions. Munoz et al. (2014) found power to be among the motivating factors in their study of Texas superintendents.

Although not specifically using the term power, all participants of the current study cited the opportunity to impact students as their reason for serving in the position, like power or authority. Being power-driven is often seen in a negative light. However, although these women are driven by power, their spiritual grounding causes them to show up differently than those who might otherwise be driven by power. This grounding can be viewed as driven by a spiritual power. This power is important to discuss because it causes them to restrain, when necessary, lead with a spirit of servitude, and motivate them to remain in the position although facing numerous challenges and barriers. One of the participants named achievement as her reason for pursuing superintendency. She thrives on setting goals and achieving them. Their motivation to lead impacts their daily experiences as superintendents.

Impact of lived experiences on their leadership

As these women lead as superintendents, they draw on experiences from their early lives. Their life experiences, like their spirituality, provide motivation and strategies for navigating the position. Like the participants in Tonya Bailey-Walker's 2018 study of Black women superintendents, a desire to prove competency surfaced as a challenge. One participant spoke passionately about the harm caused by her fifth-grade teacher. She spoke of wanting to prove she would be successful in life due to the treatment she endured from the teacher. The desire to prove herself has served as a motivator in her leadership. Additionally, the women in this study provided countless examples of how events (both positive and negative) have impacted their leadership. Being a second language learner, persevering through academic challenges, serving in roles such as substitutes and counselors, and being parents are some ways in which their lived experiences have impacted how they currently lead.

Describing the impact of lived experiences on their leadership provided some of the most vulnerable moments of this study. They spoke of joyous moments with family and friends and being driven to do their best work and have success in life because of important relationships and accountability from loved ones. In contrast, they shared dark moments such as living in poverty, losing parents, and enduring both physical and emotional abuse as noteworthy events impacting their approach to life and leadership. Several of them spoke of the mindset necessary when facing setbacks. They have gleaned positivity from all their life events. These include determination to prove someone wrong, excelling in memory of a loved one, or providing a positive example and personal story to which their current student population can relate.

Faith and family as sources of strength

The role of relationships in the participants' journey was a prevalent theme and finding in this study. Participants described relationships with their close friends and family. Those friend relationships including fellow superintendents, mentors, and girlfriends were described as sources of strength and vital to their success. They described the family as biological but also included community and church members. These findings confirmed Wiley et al. (2017) study of superintendents in Texas regarding the importance of mentoring for African American superintendents. Additionally, Angel et al. (2013) described the impact of early influences from families and the role of encouragement/support from parents, church members, neighbors, and teachers of the participants in their study. Angel et al. (2013) also found disconnection from network support as a barrier for their Black district-level administrators. This contrasts with what I found. Participants in my study spoke about the presence of their network of support. This illuminates progress as it relates to Black women finding systems of support. Or is there a difference in the findings because they focused on district-level administrators and not specifically on superintendents?

Other than this, the findings were similar as the participants of this study also spoke about internal values such as equity, justice, honesty, and being fair to all as guiding principles. The women in this study shared similar sentiments as they spoke passionately about the sources in which they drew strength. Faith and family quickly arose as the most prominent sources. In Black culture, we have strong family and faith ties, so I was not surprised how much participants rely on family and faith in their daily lives.

Multiple studies regarding Black women superintendents have revealed the presence of a strong belief in God. For example, in 2005, in an analysis of Black women superintendents, Alston documented participants' strong belief in God and servant leadership, deep care for children, a strong self-efficacy, and a focus on creating a legacy of service surfaced as common characteristics of Black women superintendents. Like those participants and due to the overwhelming mention of spirituality in their leadership, it is notable to mention spiritual leadership theory while discussing this theme. Fry (2003) described spiritual leadership theory as an intrinsic motivation model in which individuals motivate themselves and others through the leaders' values, behaviors, and attitudes. The theory is driven by two essential thoughts: (1) Creating a vision wherein leaders and followers experience a sense of calling so that their lives have purpose and meaning and make a difference (2) Establishing an organizational culture based on the values of altruistic love whereby leaders and followers have a sense of membership, belonging, and feel understood and appreciated (Fry, 2003). Also, according to Fry, personal practices such as yoga, meditation, prayer, etc. are often used to instill self-awareness and draw strength from a higher power. Participants described daily practices such as morning prayer and meditation. They reiterated throughout the interviews their tendency to turn to God for guidance and strength. Additionally, they spoke of seeing their work as superintendents as a calling. Fry described calling as the

belief that they can make a difference through service to others. All participants of this study attached their motivation for pursuing and remaining in the position to the belief that they can make a difference in the lives of students. They highlighted their commitment to servant leadership.

The second essential thought of spiritual leadership theory centers around altruistic love. Fry (2003) explained altruistic love as the leader or organization's core values. These values could be outwardly displayed in the form of artifacts or more subtly demonstrated through one's actions. The women of this study displayed characteristics of altruistic love in their responses by using words described by Fry such as honesty, integrity, patience, and kindness. They even described the physical environment in which they use artifacts to display their values and work diligently to create workspaces in which they communicate a culture of respect among employees. Several of them spoke of the culture they create with colleagues to ensure collaboration and belonging for all such as shared decision-making, encouraging positive dissonance, and sharing of multiple perspectives.

Fry insists that aspects of spiritual leadership theory positively impact work environments and increase organizational commitment, productivity, and continuous improvement. The characteristics and behaviors of these participants could be correlated to the success they have seen in their leadership positions. While spiritual leadership might not be necessary for organizational effectiveness, it has the potential to positively improve organizations. Participants in this study attested to spirituality being an effective tool in their leadership practices.

Connections to previously conducted research

As research on this topic continues to grow, connections to previously conducted research studies arose as important to share. Brunner (2000) studied the lived experiences of 12

Black women superintendents and described three main findings. Two of those findings are validated in this study: (1) The participants' stories consisted of various experiences of inequality (2) Participants leaned on the use of various strategies that debunked gender bias. In this study, participants shared strategies such as building relationships and collaboration to debunk gender bias. The two veteran superintendents in this study spoke at length about their ability to work with anyone despite the barriers or challenges of being a Black woman in the position. Interestingly, both participants who have remained superintendent for 10 years reiterated the significance of building relationships with their school board and connections with community stakeholders. Sampson (2018) found almost identical results as participants shared the importance of school board relationships, solid connections with community members, and passion for students as strategies for longevity with Texas superintendents. Bernal et al. (2017) conducted a comparative study of women and male superintendents. No common themes were found between the two groups. However, themes of communication, relationships, and vision were found. The constant feeling of needing to prove themselves, expectations around familial responsibilities, and working harder were also common. Although only relationships arose as a theme in my study, all these findings were mentioned as challenges or strategies for success by at least one participant in my study. While barriers and challenges of Black women superintendents are crucial to discuss, strategies for success are needed to ensure potential aspirants and others currently serving in the position have examples of proven strategies for success.

Many of the previously conducted research on this topic utilized Patricia Collins' Black feminist thought as a framework. Although I chose to examine their lived experiences absent of a framework to ensure my thoughts were not biased, many of Collins' tenets were realized. Collins' Black feminist thought draws on the importance of Black women relaying their own lived

experiences (Collins, 1990). Interviewing superintendents directly allowed me to understand the essence of their lived experiences. This study reiterates Collins' assertions of the importance of Black women telling their own stories including the concept of "self-definition" or "the power to name one's reality." Collins also asserts that Black women being underrepresented in positions for which they qualify cannot only be attributed to gender. Intersectionality is at play. Black feminist thought insists that the experiences of Black women are unique and do not simply align with feminist theory. She asserts that African American women face double marginalization in that their lived experiences are impacted by both race and gender.

Collins describes the effects of racism as visible and palpable. In the work setting, it shows up as discriminatory acts such as exclusive language, discriminatory practices, and even acts of violence (Collins, 1990). The data collected in this study illuminates the presence of racial discrimination. Examples of this marginalization were seen in participants' responses regarding the differential treatment in comparison to their White peers. They shared the necessity to prepare at great lengths before taking ideas to their teams or school boards. Sharing how it takes so much more thought, power, and energy to serve in the position.

Theoretical implications

Spiritual leadership as described by Fry (2003), mentions vision, altruistic love, and hope as three main characteristics of intrinsic motivation. Collins (1990) in Black feminist thought suggests that race and gender cause significant barriers and challenges for Black women, therefore impacting their lived experiences. Data from my study suggests how these Black women superintendents respond to the challenges, are motivated to do the work, and how they approach the work is due to the presence of spiritual leadership characteristics. In other words, because the

Spiritual resilience theory is depicted at the top, representing the overarching framework. The central concept of "Intersectionality" (Race, Gender, Spirituality) is shown as the foundation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of these factors. Branching out from "Intersectionality," there are two main components: "Spiritual leadership characteristics" and "Spiritual resilience theory." These components are connected, indicating their interrelatedness. "Spiritual Leadership Characteristics" lead to "Spiritual Resilience Theory," highlighting the influence of spiritual leadership traits on the development of spiritual resilience.

"Spiritual Resilience Theory" is connected to "Transformative Leadership Practices," illustrating how spiritual resilience informs leadership behaviors that challenge systemic injustices and promote positive change. This chart provides a clear visual representation of the key constructs and their relationships within the proposed theory, making it easier to understand the theoretical framework.

Spiritual resilience theory

Tenets. Sound theories possess tenets to explain the main principles of the theory. Spiritual resilience theory is based on the following tenets:

- (1) Intersectional framework;
- (2) Spiritual leadership characteristics;
- (3) Black feminist thought;
- (4) Response to discrimination; and
- (5) Empowerment and liberation

Key propositions. I developed three key propositions to further explain my theory. (1) Black women superintendents who exhibit spiritual leadership characteristics are more resilient in the face of racial and gender discrimination, demonstrating greater psychological well-being

and professional efficacy. (2) Spiritual resilience enables Black women superintendents to enact transformative leadership practices that challenge systemic inequities, promote diversity and inclusion, and foster a sense of belonging among students, staff, and community members. (3) Intersectional approaches that integrate insights from Black feminist thought and spiritual leadership theory are essential for understanding and addressing the unique experiences and needs of Black women superintendents within educational leadership contexts.

Assumptions. The following assumptions are being explained to help readers gain clarity about spiritual resistance theory. The theory assumes that individuals' experiences are shaped by the intersection of multiple social identities, including race, gender, and spirituality. It posits that the unique combination of these identities influences how Black women superintendents perceive and respond to discrimination within educational leadership contexts. Secondly, it assumes that Black women superintendents possess or can cultivate spiritual leadership characteristics, as outlined in Fry's Spiritual Leadership Theory. These characteristics include vision, integrity, empathy, self-awareness, humility, and service orientation. The theory further assumes that these characteristics play a significant role in shaping their responses to discrimination and promoting resilience. The theory also assumes that racial and gender discrimination are pervasive and impactful phenomena within educational leadership contexts. It postulates that Black women superintendents regularly encounter various forms of discrimination, including overt and covert biases, microaggressions, and structural inequities, which can negatively affect their well-being and professional effectiveness. The theory assumes that spiritual resilience is a key factor in enabling Black women superintendents to navigate and overcome the challenges posed by discrimination. It posits that their spiritual beliefs, values, practices, and connections provide a source of strength, hope, and meaning, empowering them to persist in the face of adversity and advocate

for social justice. Additionally, it assumes that Black women superintendents with spiritual resilience engage in transformative leadership practices that challenge systemic injustices and promote equity and inclusion within educational institutions. Spiritual resistance theory postulates that their leadership approaches prioritize collaboration, empathy, empowerment, and collective action, fostering positive organizational change and community engagement. Finally, spiritual resistance theory assumes that Black women superintendents possess agency and the capacity to effect change within their professional roles and broader societal contexts. It posits that their spiritual resilience enables them to reclaim their power, voice, and identity, thereby fostering empowerment, liberation, and social transformation.

Key constructs. I am naming six key constructs of spiritual resistance theory.

(1) Spiritual Resilience. This construct refers to the capacity of Black women superintendents to withstand and overcome adversity by drawing upon their spiritual beliefs, values, practices, and connections. It encompasses their ability to find meaning, purpose, and strength in the face of discrimination and other challenges encountered within educational leadership contexts.

(2) Spiritual Leadership Characteristics. These are qualities and behaviors associated with effective leadership informed by spiritual values and principles. Examples of spiritual leadership characteristics include vision, integrity, empathy, self-awareness, humility, and service orientation. These characteristics shape the leadership approach of Black women superintendents and influence their responses to discrimination.

(3) Transformative Leadership Practices. Transformative leadership practices involve strategies and actions aimed at creating positive change and advancing social justice within educational institutions. These practices prioritize collaboration, empowerment, empathy, and col-

lective action, with a focus on challenging systemic injustices and promoting equity and inclusion. Black women superintendents may engage in transformative leadership practices to address discrimination and foster inclusive environments.

(4) *Empowerment.* Empowerment refers to the process of enabling individuals to assert their power, agency, and autonomy to effect change and improve their circumstances. In the context of this theory, empowerment involves the liberation of Black women superintendents from oppression, discrimination, and marginalization, allowing them to fully realize their potential and advocate for social justice within educational settings.

(5) *Intersectionality.* Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, gender, and spirituality, which create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. This construct acknowledges that the experiences of Black women superintendents are shaped by the intersection of multiple identities and influence how they perceive and respond to discrimination within educational leadership contexts.

(6) *Discrimination.* Discrimination encompasses the unfair or unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on their race, gender, or other social identities. In the context of this theory, discrimination may manifest as overt or covert biases, stereotypes, microaggressions, and structural inequities encountered by Black women superintendents within educational institutions.

Key definitions. Terms can have varied meanings depending on the author. Here I describe the key terms of spiritual resistance theory by providing definitions as they relate to this theory.

Intersectionality. Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, which create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. In the context of this theory, intersectionality recognizes that the experiences of Black women superintendents are shaped by the intersection of their racial, gender, and spiritual identities.

Spirituality. Spirituality refers to a belief and deep connection to a higher power. Although the participants of this study identify as Christian, the theory is connected to Christianity. While spirituality is an important tenet of Christianity, spiritual resistance theory can be applied to individuals who practice any religious faith. The most important tenet is the belief and connection to a higher power, regardless of who or what the higher power is.

Spiritual leadership characteristics. Spiritual leadership characteristics encompass qualities and behaviors associated with effective leadership informed by spiritual values and principles. These may include vision, integrity, empathy, self-awareness, humility, service orientation, and a commitment to ethical decision-making. In this theory, spiritual leadership characteristics are viewed as foundational to the leadership approach of Black women superintendents.

Racial and gender discrimination. Racial discrimination refers to the differential treatment or unfavorable actions directed at individuals or groups based on their race or ethnicity. Gender discrimination similarly involves unequal treatment or prejudice against individuals or groups based on their gender identity or expression. Within the context of educational leadership, racial and gender discrimination may manifest in various forms, including bias, stereotypes, exclusion, and systemic inequities.

Spiritual resilience. Spiritual resilience refers to the capacity of individuals to withstand and overcome adversity by drawing upon their spiritual beliefs, values, practices, and connections. It involves the ability to find meaning, purpose, and strength in the face of challenges, enabling individuals to adapt, grow, and thrive despite difficult circumstances. In this theory, spiritual resilience is considered a key factor in empowering Black women superintendents to navigate and respond to discrimination.

Transformative leadership. Transformative leadership involves a leadership approach that aims to create positive change and advance social justice by challenging existing systems of oppression and fostering inclusive and equitable environments. It emphasizes collaboration, empowerment, empathy, and collective action, with a focus on addressing systemic injustices and promoting the well-being and development of all stakeholders. Within this theory, transformative leadership practices are seen as central to the leadership approach of Black women superintendents.

Empowerment and liberation. Empowerment refers to the process of enabling individuals or groups to assert their power, agency, and autonomy to effect change and improve their circumstances. Liberation involves the liberation of individuals or groups from oppression, discrimination, and marginalization, allowing them to fully realize their potential and live with dignity and equality. In the context of this theory, empowerment, and liberation are viewed as outcomes of spiritual resilience and transformative leadership, enabling Black women superintendents to advocate for social justice and promote inclusive educational environments.

Implications of spiritual resilience theory. The findings derived from the creation of spiritual resilience theory can indeed be applied to a broader context of leadership positions beyond the superintendency. Here are some implications to illustrate how these findings can inform and impact leadership across various domains:

Leadership development programs. Insights gained from the theory can be incorporated into leadership development programs designed for aspiring leaders from diverse backgrounds. Programs can be tailored to cultivate spiritual resilience and promote transformative leadership practices among leaders in education, business, healthcare, government, and non-profit sectors.

Diversity and inclusion initiatives. Organizations can utilize the theory's emphasis on intersectionality and empowerment to inform diversity and inclusion initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive leadership cultures. Strategies for promoting equity, addressing discrimination, and amplifying underrepresented voices can be implemented across different leadership levels and sectors.

Organizational policies and practices. The theory's focus on challenging systemic injustices and promoting social justice can inform the development of organizational policies and practices that advance equity and inclusion. Leaders can advocate for policies that support diversity recruitment, retention, and advancement, and equitable access to resources and opportunities for all employees.

Leadership coaching and mentorship. Leadership coaches and mentors can draw upon the theory's insights to support leaders in developing spiritual resilience, navigating discrimination, and embracing transformative leadership approaches. Coaching and mentorship programs can provide guidance, support, and encouragement to help leaders overcome challenges and maximize their potential.

Research and scholarship. Scholars and researchers can further explore the applicability of the theory to diverse leadership contexts through empirical studies and theoretical inquiries. Research can investigate how spiritual resilience and transformative leadership practices manifest across different industries, organizational settings, and cultural contexts, contributing to a deeper understanding of effective leadership in diverse environments.

Public policy and advocacy. The theory's emphasis on empowerment and liberation can inform public policy efforts and advocacy campaigns aimed at promoting social justice and equity in leadership. Leaders can engage in policy advocacy initiatives to address systemic barriers, promote inclusive leadership representation, and advocate for legislative reforms that advance equity and justice.

By applying the findings of spiritual resilience theory to a broader context of leadership positions, organizations and leaders can foster inclusive, equitable, and transformative leadership practices that promote positive change and empower individuals from diverse backgrounds to thrive in leadership roles.

Advancing Black feminist thought

Another theoretical implication of this study is my contribution to the advancement of Black feminist thought. Collins (1990) speaks of the need for Black women in academia to advance Black feminist thought by making critical moves such as being personal advocates for their material, living the experiences of their material, being willing to have a dialogue about the findings of their material, and conducting research on the lived experiences of other Black women. I am committed to all of these. Like the participants of this study, as a Black woman educational leader, I have experienced the same dual discrimination they mention. I have already been an advocate for this material by sharing my findings with colleagues through dialogue. On a

larger scale, I have brought light to the issues faced by Black women's educational leaders by sharing our challenges in an article I published for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum (ASCD) in 2023 titled, "Navigate white space: tips for new Black women leaders" (Frazier, 2023). Therefore, I view my research and work as an advancement and contribution to the theory.

Practical implications

The disproportionality of Black women in the public school superintendency has existed for far too long. This study and previously conducted studies serve as evidence of the unnecessary barriers and challenges Black women endure in pursuit of the position, as well as when they reach the position. I offer a few practical implications: (1) Mentorship and support, (2) Leadership pipeline for superintendent aspirants, and (3) Diversity among school board members. Participants shared the importance of support while serving in the position. Participants shared the importance of support while serving in the position.

While all listed family and close friends as critical, I propose state superintendent agencies require and support local districts to ensure a formal structure is in place for Black women superintendents. This might include the assignment of mentors who are current or former superintendents in the area or state. This mentorship might also be in the form of affinity spaces at superintendent conferences to allow for networking and connections. Participants spoke boldly about the crucial role of sisterhood among Black women superintendents. One of the participants was not connected and I was able to link her to the growing sisterhood of current Black women superintendents.

Although the pathway to the superintendency varies by participant, Black women leaders need to be intentional on their career path, even if the superintendency is not a current goal. In

school districts, leadership pathway programs for teachers who aspire to be building leaders and assistant principals who aspire to the principalship are common. However, once leaders reach the principalship, there is often little to no guidance for preparing for future positions or even determining what positions might help to propel principals to district-level leadership such as the superintendency.

Tallerico (2000) mentioned the importance of this diversity. This study validated the fact that relationships with school board members can be beneficial or detrimental for Black women superintendents. Therefore, recruiting diverse stakeholders to run for the school board is essential to ensure more equitable treatment of Black women superintendents. Securing more diverse school boards is only one step in the right direction.

Policy implications

The findings of this study support the need to develop several policies to address the problem of disproportionate representation of Black women superintendents. First, I recommend that states require professional development for school boards. This type of policy is already present in some states for public charter schools. For example, South Carolina Charter Law requires newly elected members of charter school boards to attend board orientation within one year of being elected or appointed. I suggest this be applied to non-charter schools in various states. The training could include topics like cultural relevance, implicit biases, inclusive hiring practices, and school board members' functions and responsibilities. While some school boards might participate in similar professional development, the development of policies will ensure all boards prioritize this learning. In Georgia, for example, the Georgia School Board Association offers online training, however, the courses are optional. This type of training is critical as each participant spoke of relationships with their board as either positive or detrimental to their success.

Public schools' work requires regular interactions between board members and superintendents, as school boards serve as the immediate supervisor to the superintendent. Board members must understand and respect the unique skills and perspectives of Black women. Professional learning about cultural differences can help to create a more positive experience for all. Similarly, required learning for Black women superintendents can help ensure they are equipped with skills to work with their board and members of all ethnic groups.

This study and past research on this topic illuminated the role of mentoring. Therefore, in addition to the practical implication regarding mentoring, I am recommending that state agencies create policies requiring formal mentoring for superintendents. Some states such as Texas require formal mentoring for new superintendents. However, I was unable to find such requirements for states in the southeast. All participants mentioned mentoring. While many will unofficially develop mentoring relationships, formal mentoring assignments and programs are needed to ensure all superintendents, especially Black women superintendents, have access to them. Policy is sometimes needed to ensure all districts/states follow recommendations. Research has proven that mentoring can positively impact the experiences, longevity, and success of Black women superintendents.

Gatekeeping is real when it comes to the public school superintendency. Tallerico (2000) reported on the prevalence of gatekeeping preventing Black women from securing the position of superintendent. Therefore, a final policy implication is the creation of policies to reduce occurrences of biased hiring practices for superintendents. Policy creations along these lines could address the disproportionate representation of Black women superintendents. The inclusion of equitable hiring practices could help to guide hiring agencies' processes and reduce the consequences of individual discrimination related to race and gender. Urban Sustainability Director's Network

(USDN) provides valuable resources to help hiring managers achieve increased equity, diversity, and inclusion in their organizations. Some of their language or recommendations could be used in newly developed policies.

Limitations

There are several delimitations of my research study. The first is related to participant selection. Due to my research interest, I intentionally focused on a narrow demographic: Black women currently or formerly serving as public school superintendents. This excluded any other demographic group such as Black men, White women and men, and other racial identities. To truly gain an in-depth look into their lives, I limited the sample size and only involved six participants. The purpose of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon. Therefore, the results of this phenomenological study are not generalizable. However, their lived experiences allow us to gain the essence of their lived experiences as superintendents. Another limitation was selecting those who have served in the southeastern region of the United States. Due to my residence in the Southeast, I was most interested in the lived experiences of those in this area. However, limiting the geographical location to one state or expanding beyond the southeast might have provided additional data. Finally, requiring participants to have served at least three years excluded several potential participants as well. Three years of experience allowed for a longer amount of time to describe the experiences of the superintendent more comprehensively.

I also identified some shortcomings of the research. Four of them are present in my study. My positionality as a Black woman educational leader is a limitation of this study. My own experiences might have unintentionally introduced biases and limited my ability to view women's experiences neutrally. I have personally experienced instances of racial discrimination, so I might have subconsciously brought those past experiences into the study. While I attempted to

remain neutral during the interviews, it is possible that my interpretation of their answers was influenced by my knowledge and experiences. I gave each participant a copy of their transcript to ensure my biases did not show up in the findings.

Secondly, the data from phenomenological studies are often retrieved from semi-structured interviews. When data is self-reported by the participants, the trustworthiness and accuracy of the stories recounted are questioned. Since responses to the interview questions were self-reported and not verified, I cannot assure you all stories and examples provided are true.

Thirdly, the study's purpose was to describe the lived experiences of Black women superintendents. While I intentionally sought participants from all three locales (urban, suburban, and rural), I did not compare their experiences and view this to be a limitation of my study. Comparing their experiences would have added more nuance to my study.

Finally, although motivation was an interest of mine, I limited the depth of this study but chose not to formally investigate motivation. While reviewing the research, I found limited research regarding the motivation of superintendents. I found no research regarding the motivation of Black women superintendents.

Suggestions for future inquiry

The limitations of my study led to several suggestions for future inquiry. The first delimitation of my study addresses the fact that my study revolved around Black women superintendents. While this population is most interesting to me, my first recommendation is for future researchers to design studies to compare the lived experiences of Black women superintendents to the lived experiences of other demographic groups such as White women and White men, Black men, or other ethnic groups. Comparing our lived experiences to other groups can further illuminate the challenges, barriers, and successes of Black women and further prove the point that

Black women's lived experiences differ. In addition to the demographic of my participants, my study also involved those currently or formerly serving in the position. A second recommendation is for researchers to conduct longitudinal studies to compare the experiences of Black women superintendents over time. I believe this will generate different challenges based on the nature of social and political climates/events of various periods and even provide insight concerning our progression or lack thereof regarding the treatment of Black women superintendents. Another delimitation of my study was the small sample size. Since I only included six participants, a third recommendation is that case studies involving larger sample sizes be conducted. These case studies could yield additional information regarding the lived experiences of Black women superintendents. Additionally, using a qualitative or mixed methods approach with a larger population would allow greater potential for the results to be generalized. Generalizable results would allow the results to be applied to the larger population of Black women superintendents.

Another limitation of my study was the geographic location I used. To increase the likelihood of securing participants, I included the entire southeastern region. Single-state research in the south was not found. While conducting research in only one state imposes limitations and severely limits the participant pool, it could lead to specific implications for the chosen state's legislation or school districts. Therefore, a fourth recommendation is that a single southern state research on the topic be conducted.

Since my study required at least three years of experience in the superintendent position, it would be interesting to compare the experiences of those with different years of experience. For example, are the experiences of those with three years versus those with 10 years significantly different? Therefore, the fifth recommendation is that this type of comparative research be

conducted. It could help us to determine if we have made progress or if the daily lived experiences improve or worsen with tenure.

Additionally, while reviewing the existing research, I did not find any studies comparing the experiences of superintendents in different locales. In this study, I diversified the participant sample by including those leading in rural, suburban, and urban districts. However, a limitation of the current is the decision not to compare their experiences. The study's purpose was simply to describe the lived experiences of superintendents, so I did not center my research around the differences in their experiences, although a few differences were noticed. For example, the three women serving in small, rural districts reported few instances of known racial discrimination and two of them have been in their positions for 10 years. Is this a contributing factor to their long tenure? Another recommendation is that future studies focus on comparing the experiences of superintendents in different regions and/or locales to determine if their experiences are significantly different and examine the length of their tenure. Research describing the lived experiences of Black women superintendents is still limited, therefore, I suggest continued research on this topic. Continued research on the type can increase access and tenure for Black women.

My final recommendation is that future research focus on the motivation of Black women superintendents since specific research does exist. While some researchers have included research questions aimed at motivation, they are usually folded in with other research purposes. They do not aim to primarily investigate the motivating factors or the impact of those motivating factors on their lived experiences. With motivation surfacing as a major theme, it is worthy of focused research.

Conclusions

The research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the Southeast? Through semi-structured interviews, I gained firsthand knowledge of the participants' lifelong experiences, thus answering the research question. The findings of this study and previously conducted studies support the fact that Black women superintendents face additional challenges in life and the workplace due to their race and gender. All the women have seen remarkable success during their tenure of over 3 years. They have figured out how to effectively navigate the double bind of being Black women in the position. Overwhelmingly, their connection and belief in God and servant leadership showed up as a source of strength. They rely on their spiritual values to guide their work and attribute much of their success to God. They have shown tenacity, skill, and strength as they encountered barriers and challenges, leading to great achievements for students. The women in this study have survived racism, sexism, and even ageism. They have overcome the loss of important people, lawsuits, unwarranted firings, public attacks, etc. They have achieved documented successes, and despite that, two of them are no longer serving in their positions due to their school boards choosing not to extend their contracts. As I spent time with each of them, I can attest to their passion for children, ability to think deeply and critically, strength in building relationships, instructional leadership, and knowledge of best practices for effective daily operations of the school district required of the position. Although the number of Black women superintendents is rising, we are still disproportionately represented. While more of us are securing the position, there are also many of us exiting the position. Given this, it is vital to continue our emphasis on telling the stories of the lived experiences of Black women superintendents leading to implications and solutions to the problem of disproportionate representation.

While the current study validated much of what previous research has already revealed, several factors differentiate it. One example is the intentional inclusion of participants from urban, rural, and suburban locales. Another example is the inclusion of participants from various states in the southeast. Participants hailed from four different states. The main differentiation of my study is the emergence of Black feminist spiritual leadership. These women have shown that using characteristics of spiritual leadership to guide their approach to the work, as well as a guide their response to gender and racial discrimination proves successful.

Even though the work is difficult, Black women possess unique talents and perspectives that can help push forward the work of achieving equitable outcomes for all students. I hope readers will become aware of the potential challenges and also be informed of successful strategies. These findings have implications for hiring authorities, leadership preparation programs, Black women aspirants, and those in positions to support Black women superintendents. I hope these women's experiences empower Black women aspirants to boldly pursue the position so that we are more proportionally represented in the position. We are needed in this work.

As I think about the phenomenal women in my family whose names I used as pseudonyms in this study: Lennette, Annie Bell, Juliet, Tami, Lillie, and Evelyn, I am reminded of their incredible strength, sacrifice, and impact they had on me and our small community. Like the participants, they endured struggles and showed tremendous determination. They were tenacious in pursuit of their goals, influencing the lives of many. I attribute my strong will and determination to the example they set and the values they instilled in me. The similarity between these women and my ancestors that reigns most is their commitment to God and reliance on Him in times of turmoil. Like the participants in this study, from childhood, I too, was taught about the power of prayer and to always lean on God. As I interacted with these women, the relationship felt like

more than just a researcher and participants. The connection felt like family as they reminded me of my mother, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, Godmothers, and aunts.

Completion of this study with these participants was invaluable and personal for me. Their vulnerability and transparency allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of the lived experiences of Black women superintendents. Their stories confirmed, not only the struggles Black women face in the superintendency, but more importantly, the unique strength, courage, and brilliance we possess to navigate such challenges. Although still uncertain if I will ever pursue the position, I complete this work inspired by all their successes and committed to continuing to share their testimonies to further the mission of closing the gap in the representation of Black women in the position. The more informed we are about the barriers and challenges, the more we can prepare strategies for success in the position. This research study confirmed the importance of Black women in positions of authority such as public school superintendency. Although Black women comprise less than 2% of the superintendent population (Kowalski, 2011), we have proven our right to lead and our ability to do the job with excellence when given the opportunity. Regardless of anyone's opinions about Black women educational leaders, I believe God has equipped us to do the work needed to ensure equitable outcomes for all children. Look out world. We are a force to reckon with, and we will not let glass ceilings, hate, unfair hiring practices, or any other discriminatory tool prevent us from improving public education. We will continue to positively impact the lives of children in one way or another.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email

Dear Superintendent,

My name is Tanisha Frazier and I am a doctoral student at Georgia State University in the Educational Policy & Studies Department. I am conducting a research study to explore the lived experiences of Black women who have or are currently serving as public school superintendents, deputy superintendents, or area/assistant superintendents, in the southeastern region of the United States. I am interested in learning about the impact of race/gender on their lived experiences, as well as your successes and challenges. I am reaching out with the hope that you will agree to participate as one of the six participants in my study. I retrieved your contact information from your school district's website. Documenting your personal experiences will add to the limited research about the lived experiences of Black women in the position. I believe this study will provide insight and lead to solutions to the problem of disproportionate representation of Black women in superintendent positions. It is also my hope that your story will provide support for other Black women aspirants and this information can be used by hiring personnel, as well as those able to serve as mentors for superintendents.

If you participate in this study, I will conduct three one-hour virtual interviews with you to gather essential information about your lived experiences. The interviews will be recorded on my personal, password-protected computer and can be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. Upon the interview's conclusion, you will receive a copy of the interview transcript to check for an accurate interpretation of your story. Finally, a pseudo-name will be assigned to ensure your identity is protected.

I realize your time is valuable and would be appreciative of your acceptance of this invitation. As a Black woman educational leader who has considered pursuing the superintendency, I view your work as superintendent as admirable and feel your story should be heard. Please contact me at tanishafrazier81@gmail.com or 404-xxx-xxx to accept or decline this invitation. I look forward to hearing from you.

Tanisha Frazier
Georgia State University
tanishafrazier81@gmail.com
404-xxx-xx

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

Georgia State University
Informed Consent

Title: Exploring the lived experiences of Black women superintendents: a phenomenological study

Principal Investigator: Yinying Wang

Student Principal Investigator: Tanisha Frazier

Introduction and Key Information

You are invited to take part in a research study. It is up to you to decide if you would like to take part in the study.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the southeastern region of the United States.

Your role in the study will last up to 4 total hours over the span of 2 months.

You will be asked to do the following: Answer open-ended questions over the span of three one-hour interviews.

Participating in this study will not expose you to any more risks than you would experience on a typical day.

This study is not designed to benefit you. Overall, we hope to gain information about the lived experiences of Black women superintendents to shed light and potentially help to create solutions for the problem of underrepresentation of Black women in the superintendency. This study has the potential to bring forth the unique experiences of Black women superintendents. The study will identify barriers, challenges, and even successes of the participants. Aspiring superintendents and those able to serve as mentors/support for those in the position can learn valuable lessons for future work.

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to investigate the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in the southeastern region of the United States. You are invited to take part in this research study because you are a Black woman who is currently or has served in the position of superintendent, assistant superintendent, or deputy superintendent in the southeastern region of the United States for at least three years. A total of 6 people will be invited to take part in this study.

Procedures

If you decide to take part, you will:

- Participate in three, one-hour virtual interviews with the researcher using the Cisco Webex software. The videos will be recorded.
- Three hours of your time will be needed for the interviews.
- The virtual interviewing process allows you to choose your preferred, private location.
- Upon completion of all three interviews, you will review the transcripts to ensure accuracy. This will require no more than 1 hour of your time.
- During the second interview, you will be asked to show artifacts of personal significance to help to further tell your story. These can be items such as photographs, books, jewelry, etc. These items will be shown to the researcher, but not collected.

Future Research

Researchers will remove information that may identify you and may use your data for future research. If we do this, we will not ask for any additional consent from you.

Risks

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would on a normal day of life. No injury is expected from this study, but if you believe you have been harmed, contact the research team as soon as possible. Georgia State University and the research team have not set aside funds to compensate for any injury.

Benefits

This study is not designed to benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about the lived experiences of Black women superintendents to shed light and potentially help to create solutions for the problem of underrepresentation of Black women in the superintendency. This study has the potential to bring forth the unique experiences of Black women superintendents. The study will identify barriers, challenges, and even successes of the participants. Aspiring superintendents and those able to serve as mentors/support for those in the position can learn valuable lessons for future work.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to participate in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. You may refuse to take part in the study or stop at any time.

Confidentiality

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:

- Yinying Wang, Principal Investigator; Tanisha Frazier, Student Principal Investigator; Dionne Cowan, Dissertation Committee Member; Sheryl Moss, Dissertation Committee Member
- GSU (Georgia State University) Institutional Review Board
- Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

We will use a pseudo-name rather than your name on study records. The information you provide during the video-recorded interviews will be stored on the researcher's password-protected personal computer. Recordings will be kept until June 2024 and then deleted. Please be aware that data sent over the Internet may not be secure.

When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use your name or other information that may identify you. General information such as your race and information regarding the context of your district may be shared.

Contact Information

Contact Dr. Yinying Wang, Principal Investigator, and Tanisha Frazier, Student Principal Investigator at ywang103@gsu.edu or tanishafrazier81@gmail.com if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study or your part in it

The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you want to speak to someone not involved with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

Consent

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date _____

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Introduction: Thank you so much for your time today. My name is Tanisha Frazier, and these semi-structured interviews are the main data collection tool as I work to complete my dissertation regarding the problem of underrepresentation of Black women in the position of public school superintendent. In this study, I aim to examine the lived experiences of Black women superintendents. I am interested in how the intersection of race and gender impacts your experiences, as well as the successes and challenges you have faced in the position. The goal of the interviews is to present to you a series of open-ended questions that will help me to learn more about your experiences as a Black woman in this leadership position. Further, the study examines your early life, including your family, and your path in education. In learning about your lived experiences, this study aims to contribute to the literature on the experiences of Black women superintendents that will explain the problem of underrepresentation, as well as offer solutions for supporting Black women in the position. Further, I hope that the information retrieved for this study will help to prepare a new generation of aspiring and current Black women education leaders. Please answer as honestly as you can. Your name, or any name that you mention will not be shared with others, I will use pseudonyms instead. To fully understand the essence of your lived experiences, we will complete three one-hour interviews.

Before we start, do you have any questions? If not, let's get started with the first interview:

Interview 1: Life's history

1. Briefly tell me about yourself.
2. When and where were you born?
3. What was your childhood like, and how was education emphasized?
4. What kind of student were you in K-12 and higher education?
5. Tell me about your family. What was it like growing up? Do you have siblings? What values were stressed in your family?
6. What is your family like now? Are you married? If so, when did you marry and did you have children?
7. When did you decide to enter education? What year did you begin teaching? Where did you attend undergraduate school?
8. Why did you become an educator?

Closing: This concludes our first interview. Let's go ahead and schedule our next interview. When would you be available within the next week for our second interview? Again, thank you for your time today.

Interview 2: Current lived experiences

9. Describe your experiences as a K-12 administrator.
10. Describe your career pathway to the superintendent. What most prepared you for the superintendency, including previous positions and experiences?

11. In your experiences leading to the superintendency do you feel race and gender have played a role?
12. Are you the first Black woman to serve in the position in your district?
13. What strengths or assets do you bring to the position of superintendent?
14. Tell me about your district. How many students do you serve? How many schools are there? How many years have you been superintendent there?
15. Explain and describe some of your experiences as a Black woman superintendent?
16. What challenges have you overcome as a Black woman superintendent?
17. What are some barriers that you currently encounter as a Black woman superintendent?
 - a. What tools or strategies are you using to address these current barriers?
18. What are some of the successes you have had in your position? What do you attribute to those successes?
19. In your experiences as a superintendent do you feel race and gender have played a role?
20. What do you perceive as advantages and disadvantages of being a Black woman superintendent?
21. What support mechanisms do you lean on to deal with barriers/challenges?
22. What personal artifacts do you lean on for strength? What is the history of the item? Where did you get it?
23. Why is the artifact personally significant as a source of strength for you?
24. How do you use the artifact and how often do you rely on it?
25. What motivates you to remain in the position? What is the most rewarding part of the job?
26. What motivated you to pursue your current position?
27. How have any of these factors motivated you in your career pathway: desire to set/achieve goals, professional relationships, or personal drive to enact change? Or something else?

Closing: This concludes our second interview. Let's go ahead and schedule our next interview. When would you be available within the next week for our third and final interview? Again, thank you for your time today.

Interview 3: Make meaning of experiences

28. What role do you believe your experiences in life play on your current experiences as a Black woman superintendent?
29. Why do you think there are so few Black women in the position of superintendent?
30. Do you think your experiences as a Black woman superintendent differs from men and White women? If so, why do you believe it is so?
31. As a Black woman, have you had to shift or change your personality, identity, or traits as you perform your professional duties? If so, how have you changed?
32. Why do you feel that there is a need for you to adjust?
33. What advice or recommendations do you have for other Black women who are considering pursuing a position as superintendent?

Closing: This concludes our interviews. Over the next few weeks, I will send you a transcribed copy of each of our interviews for your review. Please contact me should you have any corrections. Again, I want to thank you for your time and insights during these interviews.